

**NOTIONS OF TRADITION AND MODERNITY IN  
ITALIAN CRITICAL DEBATES OF THE 1920S**

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## Abstract

This thesis explores various redefinitions of the notions of tradition and modernity in the Italian critical debates of the 1920s.

In the years immediately following the war and throughout the 1920s the problem of the redefinition of the concepts of tradition and modernity appears to acquire pre-eminence within the critical debates. In the general atmosphere of the post-war “return to order” and with a widespread feeling that the end of the war coincides with the beginning of a new epoch, many artists and intellectuals feel the necessity of redefining the terms of critical judgement in relation to the changed cultural circumstances. In this context, the definition of modernity is gradually deprived of its associations with the concepts of “the new” and progress and becomes strictly interrelated with the notion of a return to tradition, interpreted as the continuation of the dialogue with the past, which was interrupted by pre-war avant-garde artistic and literary excesses. Particular emphasis is placed on the varying politicization of these concepts and their redefinition in terms of nationalism and internationalism.

The complexities, contradictions and ambiguities created by such redefinitions are explored through the analysis of the periodicals *Valori Plastici*, *La Ronda*, *Critica Fascista*, *Il Selvaggio*, *900*, *Il Baretto* and *Solaria*, and of the critical work of Eugenio Montale, Ardengo Soffici and Luigi Pirandello, three very important figures, who are significant participants in 1920s debates and have a prominent role in shaping the culture of the decade.

The notion of debate, within which the analysis of the concepts of tradition and modernity is inscribed, is broadly interpreted, taking into account the milieu of the

*cultura militante* during the inter-war period.

The issues treated are problematized in the light of present-day scholarly debates, with a view to repositioning the material analysed and furthering such debates.

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## Introduction

In an article published in the periodical *Il Baretto* in 1925 Giuseppe Sciortino writes :

Definì meglio, la guerra, uno stato diffuso di cose che ci ha fatto [...] caratterizzare l'epoca moderna come *epoca della critica*. Perché, in quanto alla critica, è stata notevole una maggiore chiarezza, uno sveltimento dei mezzi formali, uno sfrondamento degli inutili apparati eruditi, un sintetismo scabro e severo - qualità che spesso mancavano alla vecchia critica [...]

La nuova critica [...] nelle sue migliori manifestazioni ci ha dato la sensazione sicura di un progresso e non di un regresso, di una conquista degna di nota e non di una incalcolabile perdita.<sup>1</sup>

This statement gives a clear indication of critics' self-perception in the post-war period. The new epoch is perceived as a period of change, and criticism, whose "militant" tradition is still strongly felt, is determined to play an important part in shaping the cultural profile of its time. In his detailed study of the Italian literary landscape between the wars, the scholar and critic Giuseppe Langella stresses the importance in that period of literary and cultural periodicals, magazines and journals in the creation of a *cultura militante* -as distinct and independent from the *cultura accademica*- characterized by its modernity, extreme up-to-dateness, polemical attitude, occasional eccentricity and a lively, accessible style. The specificity of such a 'militant' culture lies in the context in which it is produced. Langella outlines the importance of the atmosphere almost of "collectivity" which characterizes the critical production of most periodicals, often, he argues, born from

suggerimenti epistolari, scoperte in libreria, scambi di opinioni, discussioni animate; nacque sui tavolini dei caffè, nelle lunghe passeggiate per i corsi, negli uffici redazionali di qualche casa editrice,



addirittura in tipografia e, perché no, visto che di ventennio fascista si tratta, presso qualche locale di partito. Non si ha idea dell'importanza che ebbero, nella produzione della cultura, i contatti diretti, i viaggi continui, gli interminabili colloqui. Molta parte di essa ebbe un'origine orale, e reca ancora l'impronta delle conversazioni preliminari [...] : quasi un'elaborazione collettiva [...] di cui il saggio [...], la prosa d'arte [...], l'esercizio letterario [...] dovevano essere il naturale prolungamento...<sup>2</sup>

The tradition of a militant culture, the existence of a notion of *critica militante*, inherited from the pre-war cultural scene, the flourishing of the periodicals and the consequent character of immediacy and almost “orality” that these elements give to the critical production of the period reflects, as Langella notices, the constant and continuous discussions and exchanges between the protagonists of the literary arena of the time. The result of such a mode of operating is the sense of an ongoing “debate”, which involves all the intellectuals engaged in the “making” of culture : ideas, positions and concepts are constantly questioned and discussed, both within and between different periodicals and groups. This ongoing discussion often takes the form of formal debates, purposely promoted by single periodicals in order to discuss or clarify what is perceived to be an important issue ; such debates frequently aim at representing a spectrum of opinions rather than establishing a consensual view.

However, it is often the case that the debate is expressed by the mere coexistence of various groups representing different positions on specific topics. There seems to be, on the part of the intellectuals, a constant feeling of confrontation and challenge, of being in an arena (and this may also partially be explained by the fact that there is, in fact, considerable exchange of contributors among periodicals and that periodicals often publish work by intellectuals of completely opposite political and ideological positions); such an impression is so strong and pervasive that the debate takes place not only on a synchronic level, that is among

contemporary groups, but also on a diachronic level : the discussion often revolves, in fact, around the positions and methods of preceding periodicals and movements, so as almost to establish a dialogue between the present and the immediate past.

The fact that a substantial amount of critical activity in the inter-war years is conducted by way of periodicals<sup>3</sup>, which are often very short-lived (sometimes only a year or even a few months), gives the sense of a certain fluidity in the development of ideas : concepts are questioned and redefined according to the constant shifts and changes that take place not only in the cultural sphere but also in the political arena.

In the years immediately following the war and throughout the 1920s the problem of the redefinition of the concepts of tradition and modernity appears to acquire pre-eminence within the critical debate. In the general atmosphere of the post-war “return to order” and with a widespread feeling that the end of the war coincides with the beginning of a new epoch, many artists and intellectuals feel it is necessary to redefine the terms of critical judgement in relation to these changed circumstances. In this respect, Lia Fava Guzzetta observes (she refers in particular to *La Ronda* but the observation could apply to most groups of intellectuals in the post-war period) that after the war ‘essi [the *rondisti*] [...] proprio per essere *sopravvissuti* hanno in ogni caso un problema, se non altro, di continuazione.’<sup>4</sup> In this context, establishing a notion of “modern”, how to relate to literary and artistic tradition and how such tradition should be defined become key issues in the literary and artistic debates.

The debates, periodicals and authors chosen for this thesis, have been selected, without having any pretension to exhaustiveness, as significant examples of some tendencies in the redefinition of the concepts of literary and artistic tradition



and modernity within the *cultura militante* of the 1920s. The aim of the project is to explore various appropriations of these two concepts by groups of intellectuals of different cultural and political tendencies during the Twenties. The specific concepts of “tradition” and “modernity” have been chosen, as they emerge as key notions in the cultural debates in the years following the first World War and throughout the 1920s, and acquire particular importance in early debates on fascist culture. The analysis of the treatment of these concepts aims to explore their various valuations and ways in which their received and established perception is challenged and subverted. From the point of view of the redefinition of the notions of tradition and modernity the 1920s seem to represent a crucial decade: after the end of the war, in fact, the general atmosphere of a “return to order”, followed by the rise of fascism, impose a process of rethinking of these concepts according to the new circumstances.

Some important factors are taken into account in the analysis of the post-war interrelationship between tradition and modernity: the notion of “palingenesis”, deriving from the idea that the end of the war coincided with the beginning of a new epoch; the widespread feeling that the pre-war avant-garde (futurist in particular) theorization of modernity is no longer adequate as the expression of the new Italian artistic situation and that it is necessary to redefine the concept in anti-avant-garde terms; the rise of fascism and the consequent necessity of shaping a cultural identity for the new regime, which requires the elaboration of an aesthetics of revolution and order at the same time; the need felt by groups of anti-fascist or intentionally neutral intellectuals to provide an alternative to the increasing pervasiveness of fascist culture.

The research conducted in this thesis draws on recent studies on the connection between pre-war avant-garde culture and fascist ideology, on concepts

such as “nationalist modernism”, “reactionary modernism”, and “fascist modernism”, elaborated by historians and cultural historians in recent years, and on studies on the crisis of the avant-garde in the inter-war period (with particular reference to the visual arts), which challenge established perceptions and clear-cut definitions of the concepts of tradition and modernity and explore issues of continuity and rupture between the culture of the pre-war and immediate post-war years. The terms “tradition” and “modernity” have been analysed according to a cultural-historical approach, with particular emphasis on their historical provenance and their relationship to pre-war culture. The texts and authors chosen are representative of specific cultural and political tendencies throughout the Twenties.

The notion that periodicals have a major part in shaping the culture of the inter-war years has been acknowledged to such an extent that major studies on the journals of the 1920s and 1930s, such as those by Giorgio Luti and Giuseppe Langella, are entitled, respectively, *La letteratura del ventennio fascista* and *Il secolo delle riviste*, titles which highlight the importance attributed by the scholars to the magazines in the understanding of the literary history of the twentieth century.

After World War II, the period that has devoted most critical attention to periodicals has been that going from the second half of the 1960s (the first edition of Giorgio Luti’s important study *La letteratura del ventennio fascista* –entitled *Cronache letterarie fra le due guerre*- dates back to 1966) to the beginning of the 1980s. Those are also the years in which many periodicals are reprinted : particularly relevant to the topic of this thesis are *La Rivoluzione Liberale* (Parma, 1967); *Valori Plastici* (Milano, 1969); *La Voce 1914-1916* (Milano: 1969); *Lacerba* (Milano, 1970); *La Raccolta* (Milano, 1970); *Il Selvaggio* (Firenze, 1976); *Il Baretto* (Torino:

1977). Those are also the years in which many anthologies or studies containing substantial anthological sections are published. Among the best-known are the anthology of *La Ronda*, by Giuseppe Cassieri (1969), the book by Giuliano Manacorda, *Letteratura e cultura del periodo fascista* (1974), *Le Riviste di Strapaese e Stracittà. Il Selvaggio, L'Italiano, "900"* by Luciano Troisio (1975), and *Le riviste del periodo fascista* by Anna Panicali (1978). Other anthologies and collections of documents worth mentioning, published before the end of the 1960s and, before reprints were published, often used as primary sources for studies on periodicals sometimes almost impossible to find<sup>5</sup>, are *Il Selvaggio di Mino Maccari* by Carlo Ludovico Ragghianti (1955), the *Antologia di Solaria* by Enzo Siciliano (1958), the *Archivi del futurismo*, edited by Maria Drudi Gambillo and Teresa Fiori (1958), and *Le riviste di Piero Gobetti* by Lelio Basso (1961). Evidence of the renewed interest in the periodicals and its founders is also the 1974 edition of Massimo Bontempelli's *L'Avventura novecentista*, edited and introduced by Ruggero Jacobbi, the first re-edition since 1938, when the book was first published.

The most comprehensive studies on the periodicals, which present a critical yet ample overview on the militant culture of the inter-war years, are a product of the renewed interest on this subject developed in the late 1960s and 1970s. These books are still the starting point for any study involving the periodicals between the wars, as no extensive study on that topic has been published since. They are Giorgio Luti's *La letteratura del ventennio fascista* (1972), Luisa Mangoni's *L'interventismo della cultura* (1974), and Giuseppe Langella's *Il secolo delle riviste* (1982).

Giorgio Luti's seminal study is concerned with establishing the relationship between fascism and intellectuals, in terms of complicity, consensus and dissent. For this reason, his assessment of the cultural worth of certain periodicals often contains



elements almost of justification or condemnation, depending on their political stance. Luti's work seems also slightly affected by a sort of "regional" bias, in the sense that the scholar seems inclined to "defend" the products of Tuscan culture. That is the case of *Il Selvaggio*, whose "moralizing" role within fascist culture is highlighted to such an extent that the periodical is described as almost 'ingenuo' in its 'opera di demolizione e forza d'interna corrosione' and is ultimately defined as 'il moralista' that becomes 'il vero critico del costume fascista'<sup>6</sup>, while, for instance the Roman *900* is vehemently criticized.

Although very thorough and comprehensive, Mangoni's study is mainly historical and it concentrates on the political reasons and implications of artistic positions (the title, *L'interventismo della cultura*, is significant in this sense). Specific aesthetic questions are neglected or do not receive much attention by the scholar, who often offers schematic readings of the aesthetic implications of theoretical statements.

Langella's study is the most comprehensive and it highlights the various facets of the literary and political positions behind the periodicals. The broad theme of the volume -the *statuto letterario*- allows the scholar to provide an analysis of various "sub-themes", which offers a comprehensive view of the cultural landscape in the inter-war years. In addition, although it explores, together with achievements, ambiguities and contradictions of the various periodicals, Langella's book does not seem to manifest a specific bias, or a need to justify certain positions or to condemn others. However, being a product of its time, the book does not seem to be set out to challenge established aesthetic categories. It is still a type of study in the same tradition as those by Luti and Mangoni, to which it often refers.

The 1990s witnessed a new wave of interest in the culture of the inter-war years. In particular, the beginning of the 1990s saw the publication of various collections of critical writings. Giuseppe Bottai's *La Politica delle arti. Scritti, 1918-1943*, edited by Alessandro Masi (1992), and Ardengo Soffici's *Estetica e politica. Scritti critici 1920-1940*, edited by Simonetta Bartolini (1993), have been particularly useful for this thesis. Also, at the beginning of 1990s the publication of a series of studies on the relationship between fascism and culture have challenged established critical categories, thereby paving the way for a new methodological approach to the culture of the 1920s and 1930s.

Although these studies belong mainly to the field of history and cultural history, rather than literature, and deal with aspects of inter-war culture from different points of view, they all have a specific aspect in common, namely the assumption that fascism and modernity are not antithetical concepts and, therefore, that it is necessary to redefine the notion of modernity in terms that should no longer be related to the ideas of "progression", "advancement", or "progress". These studies are of particular interest for the development of the approach used for this thesis, since as a result of them, notions such as "return to tradition", modernity, *classicità*, whose meaning has not been fundamentally challenged in the critical tradition, become open to new interpretations.

Particularly important, in this respect, is Emilio Gentile's seminal book *Le origini dell'ideologia fascista*, first published in 1975 and re-published in 1996. Gentile's study highlights, from an historian's point of view and in relation to the birth of fascist ideology, the role of pre-war avant-garde in shaping the ideology of fascism, and above all the notion of fascism as part of the process of modernity. Gentile also stresses the importance, in the interpretation of fascism as an alternative

form of modernism, of the concept of “politicization of aesthetics”, which, in his view, should be applied to fascism as much as that of “aesthetization of politics”, famously used to describe fascism by Walter Benjamin in his essay *The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction*.<sup>7</sup> The problematization of this traditional dichotomy has been used in this thesis to analyse the interaction between aesthetics and politics in the first years of the regime, particularly in terms of the construction, operated by fascist artists, of versions of fascism which appear to be based on aesthetic as much as political concepts.<sup>8</sup>

The notion of fascism as a form of “alternative modernity” has also been fruitfully developed during the 1990s by the historians Roger Griffin and Walter Adamson. In his *The Nature of Fascism* (1991) Griffin stresses that the palingenetic myth underlying fascist ideology makes it fundamentally anti-conservative, thereby providing a model for an ‘alternative modernism’ rather than a rejection of modernity. Griffin also interestingly suggests that when used in many studies of fascism before the late 1970s, the definition ‘anti-modern’ ‘invariably betrays a set of value judgements about what constitutes the ideal path of modernization for societies to follow and thus assumes a teleological myth of its own which makes it highly dubious as a useful type for analysing alternative ideologies.’<sup>9</sup>

Walter Adamson has discussed extensively the relationship between pre-war avant-garde movements and fascist ideology, with particular reference to Florentine culture both before the war and after the rise of fascism. In his book *Avant-Garde Florence. From Modernism to Fascism* (1993) and in several articles written throughout the 1990s<sup>10</sup> the historian has analysed the link between the avant-garde quest for a spiritual and cultural revolution, the way in which such a quest is



subsumed in the fascist movement, and how the pre-war internationalism and experimentalism is replaced by a nationalist restoration of classical aesthetic values.

The relationship between modernity and totalitarianism in relation to German nazism has been fruitfully analysed since the 1980s. Particularly relevant to the topic of this thesis is Jeffrey Herf's *Reactionary Modernism. Technology, culture and politics in Weimar and the Third Reich*, published in 1984, which deals, from a sociological point of view, with the incorporation of modern technology into the cultural system of fundamentally romantic and antirational German nationalism (and subsequently into Nazi ideology). The author stresses how what he calls "reactionary modernism", namely 'an aesthetic view of technology as comprising new, stable forms that constituted beautiful alternatives to a flabby and chaotic bourgeois order'<sup>11</sup>, has affinities with both avant-garde modernism and the support of technical innovation. Reactionary modernism views technology as the physical embodiment of inner qualities rather than as the product of Positivism. The belief that modern technology could be compatible 'with immediacy, [...] life, soul, and feeling [...] with the permanence of form over the transience of chaotic market; with the beauty of authoritarian politics rather than with the confusion and lack of clarity of parliamentary discussion'<sup>12</sup> results in an alternative version of modernity, in which technological modernity and political reactionarism coexist.

As regards the relationship between aesthetics and politics, Andrew Hewitt's *Fascist Modernism* examines 'the points of contiguity between a "progressive" aesthetic practice and a "reactionary" political ideology.'<sup>13</sup> Hewitt still retains the notion of fascism as a fundamentally reactionary ideology. In this context he uses Marinetti as an example of 'the shift [...] away from a historically legitimated aesthetic of innovation toward that avant-garde "simultaneity of the radically

disparate”. Marinetti effects a rupture –the avant-garde’s break with modernism- that cannot be reinscribed within a modernist temporality of progress’<sup>14</sup>, thereby questioning a notion of modernity exclusively based on progression and progress.

The crisis of the notion of modernity in terms of progress/progression has been analysed in the field of visual arts by Giuliana Tomasella in her book *Avanguardia in crisi nel dibattito artistico fra le due guerre* (1995), in which the scholar discusses the semantic shift that characterizes the definition of modernity in the inter-war period, with particular reference to such artists as Soffici, Carrà, Sironi, Severini. These artists are presented as examples of the crisis of the avant-garde notion of modernity between the wars. Particularly significant are the scholar’s observations on how, in a period of crisis of the avant-garde, the concept of modernity becomes almost like an “empty container”, which, in the post-war context, is “filled” by new concepts, such as *classicità*, tradition, accessibility, *popolarità*.

All these studies point, from different points of view and in different fields, to the necessity to redefine the parameters of modernity in the inter-war years, in terms both of aesthetic theorization and artistic product. As has been seen, this has partially been done in the field of visual arts.<sup>15</sup> However, this kind of revision has not been yet applied to the critical debate in the literary field. This is probably mainly due to the fact that the periodicals have increasingly become a specialized area, with only a few scholars working in the field. The interest in the periodicals of the inter-war years, which characterized the 1960s and 1970s, is linked to a renewed interest in the *cultura militante* of the fascist years, aiming at assessing the relationship between fascism and culture and at evaluating the intellectuals’ involvement and responsibilities in the creation of consensus. Such an interest has resulted in the creation of a group of specialists, who since the ’60s and ’70s have devoted their

work to the study of militant culture through periodicals and journals, from that specific angle. Although the work of these scholars is immensely valuable, the field of the periodicals is still dominated by these figures, who, despite having provided an enormous contribution to the history of literature and criticism in the twentieth century, do not offer new critical perspectives.

Another factor which characterizes traditional studies on the periodicals is a division between literature and the visual arts. Such a division usually results in a lack of attention to their constant interrelationship in the critical and theoretical debates between the wars. A significant example is that such a periodical as *Valori Plastici*, despite its strong theoretical influence on the literature of the 1920s, does not normally appear in studies on inter-war periodicals, which normally focus on journals mainly as part of literary history.<sup>16</sup>

The result is not only that certain concepts have not undergone any challenge, but that they have not been the object of any critical interest. In addition, specific areas of the critical debate have been neglected by the critics, who may have so far considered them “untouchable” or simply uninteresting, for their obvious association with fascism, which makes them to a certain extent “unworthy” of critical attention (it is the case, for instance, of the *Critica Fascista* “Enquiry on fascist art”, analysed in this thesis). As Alessandro Masi points out,

la storia e la letteratura artistica italiana del '900 dimostrano ancora gravi ritardi di natura [...] “geologica”, dovuti all'esuberanza e alla quantità delle stratificazioni epocali, alla moltitudine delle falde e, non ultimo, al poco gradevole incarico degli studiosi di uscire, anche se per un breve lasso di tempo, dal proprio territorio alla ricerca di nuove fonti.<sup>17</sup>



The attempt to “step out of one’s own territory to look for new sources” has been at the basis of the research carried out for this thesis. The above-mentioned recent studies on history, cultural history, and art history, have provided a framework for the questioning and discussion of the concepts of tradition and modernity from a critical point of view which has so far not been adopted by literary critics.

Another important text that has provided some useful tools in the discussion of modernity and which the Italian critical tradition has not usually applied to the study of the periodicals has been Peter Bürger’s *Theory of the Avant-garde*. Although Bürger’s text is not totally comprehensive (for instance, it does not deal with the specificity of Italian avant-garde movements), some of his definitions have been applied to the material treated in this thesis and have provided a useful tool in the identification of links between pre-war avant-garde and post-war aesthetics. In particular, the definition, developed by Bürger, of avant-garde as attempting to reconcile art and life-praxis, and the notion of the avant-garde rejection of individual production for individual reception<sup>18</sup> have been used to discuss the legacy of the avant-garde in post-war movements, and to explore the links between the avant-garde project and the politicization of aesthetic issues in pre-fascist and early fascist years.

The following description of the chapters of this thesis provides an explanation for the selection of the texts, which cover a spectrum of positions in the critical debate. The use of interdisciplinarity, of texts that have been explored, and of texts that have not received critical attention has been applied to the creation of a “map of modernity” in the 1920s, which draws on the interrelationship between its concept and the redefinition of tradition, in the cultural context of rejection of pre-war avant-garde discourse, return to order, rise and consolidation of fascism.

Chapter One focuses on the analysis of the problematization of the concepts of tradition and modernity in post-war critical debates and on their development during the 1920s. In the years immediately after the end of the war the general feeling among writers and intellectuals is that the futurist experience has exhausted its artistic possibilities and has lost the potential to represent Italian artistic modernity. The pervasive atmosphere of a call for order and a return to tradition forces intellectuals to reposition themselves in relation to the use of tradition as a reference and to rethink and problematize the definition of artistic modernity. The general feeling is that it is necessary not so much to return to tradition but, “to continue tradition”. The idea of continuity allows artists to conceive of a return to tradition not as an act of regression, but of “reconstruction”, after the “destruction” (and self-destruction) effected by the avant-garde. In this context, the notion of modernity is detached from its association with the notions of “the new” and progress, and its definition is increasingly intertwined with that of tradition, involving issues of national cultural identity and such concepts as *italianità* and *classicità*, which are appropriated by fascist culture in the second half of the decade and questioned by anti-fascist culture.

Chapter Two focuses on redefinitions of the notion of *classicità* by the periodicals *Valori Plastici* and *La Ronda* in the years between 1918 and 1922, pervaded by the post-war atmosphere of a return to order. Although *Valori Plastici* deals with the visual arts and *La Ronda* focuses on literature, both projects concentrate on the restoration of an artistic and literary “order” based on the return to art as *mestiere*, the recovery of “form” (both in art and literature) and style as against the corruption of technique represented by the excesses of the pre-war avant-garde

(and, as far as *La Ronda* is concerned, also by D'Annunzio and Pascoli's "decadence"). Both periodicals base their cultural programme on a critique of the modernity associated with the avant-garde project and on the redefinition of the notion of *classicità* as the key to a new version of modernity. In particular, within their project of the redefinition of a new modernity, they link the return to tradition with the idea of "italianness", which they perceive as connected to the notion of "classical". In this sense, it could be said that they are complementary, and that they are evidence of the multifaceted character assumed by elaborations of the notion of the classical in the immediate post-war years.

The two periodicals have been juxtaposed in the same chapter, not only because they represent two expressions of the quest for a return to "order" and *mestiere* in anti-avant-garde terms, but also as they are interesting examples of the ambiguities and contradictions of associating the classical forms with a project of modernity conceived in national terms, while claiming not to be involved in politics. The periodicals also represent the lively interaction between literary and artistic debates, which is not often acknowledged by traditional criticism. In particular, as far as *La Ronda* is concerned, the emphasis in this thesis is placed on the ambiguities and contradictions of its quest for modernity within the notion of the classical, rather than on the conservatism which is traditionally attributed to the periodical, while *Valori Plastici* has been chosen because it is a periodical, which, despite being extremely rich and complex in theoretical terms, has only received scant critical attention.<sup>19</sup> In addition, it is a periodical which is important in the development of artistic and literary theory in the 1920s (the *900* movement is the most obvious example).



Chapter Three focuses on some appropriations of the concepts of tradition and modernity from the point of view of the interrelation of aesthetics and politics in the attempt to define fascist culture. With the rise of fascism intellectuals are confronted with the issue of the creation of a cultural identity for the new regime. As Mussolini himself declared in his 1926 speech in Perugia that a fascist art should be ‘tradizionalista e al tempo stesso moderna’ and that ‘bisogna creare, altrimenti saremo gli sfruttatori di un vecchio patrimonio’<sup>20</sup>, a need is felt among the intellectuals involved in the project of shaping fascist culture to define the essence of fascist art in terms which would respond to such principles. In this context, the task most intellectuals set for themselves is also to try to preserve a certain freedom for artists and to prevent the creation of a state art. However, the involvement of many artists in the creation of a cultural identity for the new regime is not only motivated by their need to preserve an “organic” function within the dictatorship, but also by the feeling of working towards the fulfilment of ideological aspirations which they had nourished before the war and which are then transferred to definitions of aesthetic and political concepts related to fascism.

The texts chosen for the analysis of the appropriation and redefinition of the concepts of tradition and modernity within the fascist culture of the 1920s are the contributions to the Debate on Fascist Art, published in the periodical *Critica Fascista* between 1926 and 1927; the periodicals *Il Selvaggio* and *900* and the *Strapaese/Stracittà* dispute, as representative of different tendencies within fascist culture. The Debate on Fascist Art has been chosen as a significant example of various attempts to define fascist art in terms of the interrelation of the concepts of tradition, modernity and the nation. It has been selected for its importance and relevance to the topic of this thesis, but also for its problematic character, both in

itself -as a document of fascist aesthetics and fascist cultural politics during the first years of the regime- and in terms of critical history: the Debate has in fact never been analysed in its artistic content, but has always been considered as a historical document.

As far as the analysis of *Il Selvaggio* is concerned, the emphasis is placed on the *selvaggi*'s presentation of ruralism as a form of true and "healthy" Italian modernity, which is opposed to the corrupting influence of urbanism and foreign culture. *900*'s project of modernity is analysed in the light of its theoretical implications, which make it part of the fascist palingenetic aspirations. In the context of the *Strapaese/Stracittà* dispute, *Il Selvaggio* is notoriously the main representative of the *Strapaese* movement and has been analysed as a specific interpretation of the relationship between tradition and modernity, investing both politics and culture. *900*, on the other hand, with particular reference to the theoretical *Preamboli*, has been chosen as it is the main target of the *selvaggi*'s polemical attacks. With its subtle and precise theorization, the idiosyncratic and provocative periodization it proposes, and its concept of an art "for daily use", *900* is certainly an exponent of a modernity that, although retaining links with avant-garde theorization, begins to acknowledge the presence and the importance of the public and feels the need to integrate in the world of production.

Chapter Four focuses on the interpretation of the notions of tradition and modernity offered by the periodicals *Il Baretto* and *Solaria* between 1924 and 1929. *Il Baretto*, published in Turin between 1924 and 1928, is used to explore the use of the idea of tradition by the liberal bourgeois intellectuals gathered around Piero Gobetti's political and cultural project of the involvement of the intellectuals in the *rivoluzione liberale* and the creation of a new state.

The group of *Il Baretto* reads the return to tradition not in terms of style but in ideological and moral terms as an alternative both to a nationalist appropriation of the concept and to projects -such as that of *La Ronda*- which are exclusively interested in looking at tradition from the point of view of form and in offering a version of the Italian literary tradition as fundamentally disengaged. The cultural reference for *Il Baretto*'s project is the Enlightenment, as a return to a specific tradition of Europeanism which is opposed to the provincialism and nationalism of contemporary culture.

*Solaria*'s project, started in 1926, partially inherits *La Ronda* and *Il Baretto*'s legacies, which exercise a specific influence on the periodical particularly in its early years. Such legacies imply that the *solariani* on the one hand retain *La Ronda*'s concept of style and on the other they inherit from *Il Baretto* the notion of the ethical value of creating a European literature. The coexistence within the periodical of these two tendencies allows the *solariani* to assume at times a critical attitude towards *La Ronda*'s academicism and its elitist self-exclusion from any social commitment. For *Solaria* the acknowledgement of the point of reference of national tradition is the key to the creation of a modern, "European" literature. However, despite the legacy of *Il Baretto*, *Solaria*'s project of Europeanism, at least in the first years, presents certain ambiguities, as the idea of Europe presented by the periodical is abstract, literary, individualistic and fundamentally detached from the reality of the contemporary social and political situation.

Eugenio Montale, as a contributor to both *Il Baretto* and *Solaria*, represents a significant link between the two projects. Montale's critical work in the 1920s has been chosen for his specific interpretation of the value of European modernity, which



Montale sees as a common category whose features are identifiable internationally in contemporary culture.

Chapter Five concentrates on the analysis of the critical work of a single artist, Ardengo Soffici, rather than on specific debates. The development of Ardengo Soffici's aesthetics throughout the 1920s is particularly relevant to the topic of this thesis, since as a painter, writer and critic, he can be considered a major participant in the literary and artistic debates of his time. Soffici has been chosen as he represents a significant example of the gradual merging of aesthetics and politics which characterizes many artists' theorization during the first decade of the regime. Particular emphasis is given to Soffici's elaboration of the concepts of *italianità* and *classicità*.

Finally, Chapter Six focuses on Luigi Pirandello's theoretical production between 1918 and 1934. Although he does not directly participate in the debates, Pirandello's critical work has been chosen as it represents an important reference, since he is one of the most representative exponents of the concept of modernity as a condition of crisis which is both promoted and criticized throughout the 1920s, according to different standpoints. He also is important for his theorization on theatre, which presents his own version of the relationship between tradition and modernity.

Particular emphasis is given to his detachment from Naturalism and to his development of a concept of art based on the creation rather than the representation of reality, which lead to an idiosyncratic interpretation of the notions of "the new" and modernity. Attention is also given to Pirandello's definition of the "new theatre" as a theatre which cannot be separated from the Italian theatrical tradition, and whose

character of novelty should derive from its being rooted in the national tradition rather than being a mere imitation of foreign models.

Pirandello's essays on Verga are analysed as an example of Pirandello's idiosyncratic relationship with the tradition of Naturalism and his attempt to redeem Verga from the aesthetics of *verismo*.

<sup>1</sup> Giuseppe Sciortino, 'Tendenze letterarie', *Il Baretto*, 5 March 1925, p. 20.

<sup>2</sup> Giuseppe Langella, *Il secolo delle riviste. Lo statuto letterario dal "Baretto" a "Primato"* (Milano : Vita e Pensiero, 1982), pp. 5-6.

<sup>3</sup> Langella notices that 'in modo particolare proprio durante il ventennio della dittatura, una ricognizione della cultura espressa dalle riviste rischia di ricapitolare l'intero quadro della produzione letteraria...' (*Il secolo delle riviste*, p. 3)

<sup>4</sup> Lia Fava Guzzetta, 'Ideologia e letteratura nella "Ronda"', in *Percorsi di scrittura letteraria nel '900 italiano* (Roma : Gruppo Editoriale Internazionale), p. 92.

<sup>5</sup> That was certainly the case, for instance, of *Il Selvaggio*. In his *La letteratura del ventennio fascista* Giorgio Luti claims that the periodical is 'praticamente irreperibile'. He refers extensively to Ragghianti's anthology, which covers the years between 1927 and 1943, which also seems to be his source of primary texts, as Luti work only quotes texts from the 1927 onwards.

<sup>6</sup> Cfr. Giorgio Luti, *La letteratura del ventennio fascista* (Firenze: La Nuova Italia, 1972), pp. 165-166.

<sup>7</sup> Gentile points out that the politicization of aesthetics 'non solo ispirò l'atteggiamento del fascismo verso la cultura, ma fu all'origine stessa dell'incontro fra avanguardia modernista e fascismo, e fu il motivo della partecipazione di molti intellettuali modernisti al fascismo.' (*Le origini dell'ideologia fascista*, Bologna: Il Mulino, 1996, p. 27)

<sup>8</sup> See in particular Chapters Three and Five of this thesis.

<sup>9</sup> Roger Griffin, *The Nature of Fascism* (London and New York: Routledge, 1991), p. 47.

<sup>10</sup> Cfr. in particular, 'Modernism and Fascism. The Politics of Culture in Italy, 1903-1922', *American Historical Review*, 95 (1990), 359-390; 'The language of opposition in Early Twentieth-Century Italy: Rhetorical Continuities between Prewar Florentine Avant-gardism and Mussolini's Fascism', *The Journal of Modern History*, 64 (1992), 22-51; 'Avant-Garde Political Rhetorics: Pre-war Culture in Florence as a Source of Post-war Fascism', *History of European Ideas*, 16 (1993), 753-758; 'The Culture of Italian Fascism and the Fascist Crisis of Modernity : The Case of *Il Selvaggio*', *Journal of Contemporary History*, 30 (1995), 555-575.

<sup>11</sup> Jeffrey Herf, *Reactionary modernism. Technology, culture and politics in Weimar and the Third Reich* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1984), p. 224.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 227.

<sup>13</sup> Andrew Hewitt, *Fascist Modernism. Aesthetics, Politics, and the Avant-Garde* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1993), p. 1.

<sup>14</sup> *Fascist Modernism*, p. 18.

<sup>15</sup> Some interesting observations on the development of the notion of "the classic" within an aesthetic of order and "new modernity" have also been made by the art historian Elena Pontiggia. Cfr. Elena Pontiggia and Marco Quemada, eds, *L'idea del classico 1916-1932. Temi classici nell'arte italiana degli anni Venti* (Milano : Fabbri, 1992). In particular see pp. 38-43. On the application of Pontiggia's interpretation of the idea of the classical to the material treated in this thesis, see Chapters One and Two of the thesis.

<sup>16</sup> It is noteworthy that *Valori Plastici* is analysed only in Mangoni's *L'interventismo della cultura*, precisely because she studies the periodicals from an historical rather than literary point of view.

<sup>17</sup> Alessandro Masi, Introduction to Giuseppe Bottai, *La politica delle arti. Scritti 1918-1943* (Roma: Editalia, 1992), p. 10.

<sup>18</sup> Cfr. Peter Bürger, *Theory of the Avant-Garde*, translated by Michael Shaw (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1984), pp. 47-54.

<sup>19</sup> The only monograph on the periodicals is Paolo Fossati's *Valori Plastici 1918-1922* (Torino: Einaudi, 1981).

<sup>20</sup> Benito Mussolini, 'Arte e civiltà', in *Scritti e discorsi*, 12 vols (Milano : Hoepli, 1934-1939), V, p. 427.



## Chapter 1

# REDEFINING TRADITION, RETHINKING MODERNITY : CRITICAL DEBATES IN THE 1920s

Perché tutti siamo moderni [...] e non si può non esser moderni :  
ciò di cui si tratta è di sapere che cosa si pone come segno caratteristico di  
modernità e di civiltà moderna...  
(Ardengo Soffici, 1923)

In an article written for the periodical *L'Ardito* in 1921 Giuseppe Bottai summarizes the feelings of many Italian artists and intellectuals :

Noi abbiamo compreso che se c'è una maniera moderna di vivere, quest'è dominare la macchina, intensificando la vita intima, se c'è una sensibilità moderna, quest'è soprelevazione ostinata, accanita dello spirito sulla materia. Il mito progressista è in rotta. Nel mondo fragoroso di officine e fumante di ciminiere, l'uomo risolveva la sua anima nel mistero infinito dell'universo. E questo è atteggiamento nuovo di vita.<sup>1</sup>

In the same article Bottai also declares:

Eravamo partiti per la guerra con nel capo rombanti parole, come queste: "un'automobile da corsa col suo cofano adorno di grossi tubi simili a serpenti dall'alito esplosivo... un'automobile ruggente che sembra correre sulla mitraglia, è più bello della vittoria di Samotracia" [...] Ci siamo visti crollare, d'attorno, tutto quel meraviglioso castello che chiamavamo progresso. Abbiamo capita la menzogna della civiltà industriale [...] L'appartenenza mia al futurismo è stata un atto di fede; la nostra uscita è stata un atto della medesima fede.

La nostra sensibilità [...] comprende che, oggi, il futurismo è in completo, assoluto, irrimediabile contrasto con l'Italia balzata fuori dalla trincea. Ebbene: noi sentiamo ch'oggi la necessaria e salutare rivoluzione anti-tradizionale futurista sta per cessare, non già per *ritornare*, come vorrebbero alcuni, nella tradizione, ma per *seguire* la *tradizione*: il che è ben differente.<sup>2</sup>

Bottai's statements are symptomatic of a widespread feeling among intellectuals in the years following the war. He had participated in the war as an *ardito* and had joined the editorial board of the periodical *Roma futurista* in May 1919. In 1920, however, he had detached himself from Futurism. The social unrest of 1920 had made him realize that neither Futurism or *arditismo* was going to provide valid political options for the reorganization of the State. His resignation from *Roma futurista* and an exchange of letters between Bottai and Marinetti had marked the end of Bottai's futurist phase.<sup>3</sup>

In the post-war years Futurist artistic activity goes hand in hand with an intense political activity. Indeed, it is Luciano De Maria's view that the scission of the *Lacerba* group and the war did not determine the end of Futurism, but rather a turning point and 'un cambio di guardia': 'al gruppo lacerbiano si sostituisce nel 1916 il gruppo dei "giovani" de *L'Italia futurista* (diretta da Bruno Corra e da Emilio Settimelli). L'interesse si sposta verso il teatro, il cinema [...] e la politica.'<sup>4</sup>

In 1918 Filippo Tommaso Marinetti publishes the *Manifesto del partito futurista italiano*, a nationalist, militarist, anti-parliamentary and anticlerical pamphlet. In the same year Marinetti, together with Mario Carli and Emilio Settimelli founds the periodical *Roma futurista* and the first *Fasci politici futuristi* in Ferrara, Florence, Taranto, and Rome, all initiatives that have the aim to support the new-born party. In 1919 Marinetti participates in the foundation of the *Fasci di combattimento*, the first nucleus of the fascist movement, and Carli and Vecchi found the periodical *L'Ardito*. In 1919 he publishes *Democrazia futurista*, which expands the programmatic statements of the 1918 *Manifesto* and praises *arditismo*. However, although initially Futurism and the early fascist movement had seemed to share

several points of their political programme (in particular a certain anarchism, anticapitalism, republicanism, anticlericalism), in May 1920, at the second conference of the *Fasci di combattimento*, Marinetti, Carli, and Settimelli, having accused the fascist movement of reactionarism and *passatismo*, and of accepting compromises with the monarchy and the clericalist bourgeoisie, leave the fascist movement. The detachment of Futurism from the fascist movement is marked by the pamphlet *Al di là del comunismo* –published in 1920 in the magazine *Testa di ferro*– which is Marinetti reply to the fascism's reactionary turn. G. Battista Nazzaro defines the pamphlet as 'un documento di frizione, un ulteriore pronunciamento anarcosocialista [...] in opposizione alla linea impressa al fascismo da Mussolini'. He observes that 'sembra [...] che solo incidentalmente Marinetti voglia fissare i differenti obiettivi del futurismo rispetto al comunismo; e che voglia ricordare invece, in modo chiaro, i motivi per cui si differenzia dalla svolta reazionaria di Mussolini.'<sup>5</sup>

Around 1923, however, Marinetti becomes reconciled again with fascism and subsequently publishes *Futurismo e fascismo* (1924), a collection of articles, speeches, and reports, which highlight the involvement of the futurist movement in the history of fascism and its rise to power. The final section of *Futurismo e fascismo* –entitled *L'Impero Italiano*– is a celebration of Mussolini and of 'patriottismo assoluto', a concept encompassing absolutism, nationalism, and a paradoxically unlimited freedom of criticism within the limits of patriotism.<sup>6</sup> On Marinetti's return to fascism, De Maria comments that 'Marinetti e gli altri futuristi, sopraffatti dagli avvenimenti, mancavano dell'apparato concettuale per poter resistere alle lusinghe del regime trionfante'<sup>7</sup>, which is one the reasons proposed by the scholar for Marinetti's reconciliation with fascism, together with more subjective reasons, such



as ‘il nazionalismo e il desiderio di portare avanti la rivoluzione artistica futurista.’<sup>8</sup>

The scholar also observes that

Il fascismo assorbirà di fatto il futurismo neutralizzandone ogni elemento anarchico ed eversivo: venuto meno l’impulso “totalitario”, la possibilità effettiva di mantenere vitale nella teoria e nella prassi del movimento quell’ideologia globale, e quindi anche politica, che abbiamo visto caratterizzare sin dall’inizio e così fortemente il movimento, il futurismo riprende il rango di scuola letteraria, e diviene palestra per le esercitazioni parolibere di una folta schiera di epigoni.<sup>9</sup>

Marinetti himself returns to more traditional forms of literary expression during the 1920s: his *Gli indomabili* (1922) has been judged as an example of prose which ‘regge il confronto con la miglior prosa d’arte del tempo’.<sup>10</sup>

In the 1920s, in a context of “return to order” and of general rejection of futurist modernity, however, the ideological legacy of Futurism is still very strong. One reason is that it is almost impossible for artists and writers not to confront the aesthetic legacy of Futurism, which becomes the reference point for any attempt to redefine modernity. Another important reason is that the theoretical core of the futurist project, as an avant-garde project, is transferred to other artistic movements, which, despite rejecting the futurist artistic principles, are still informed by the same avant-gardist quest for an all-pervasive concept of art, and, to use Peter Bürger’s words, for the ‘reconciliation of art with life-praxis’ and the rejection the concept of “autonomous art”.<sup>11</sup>

In her 1995 study of the crisis of the avant-garde in the inter-war period Giuliana Tomasella defines the new concept of modernity which emerged after the First World War as ‘una modernità che nega se stessa, o che si vuole in linea con un tempo che non è quello “moderno” secondo l’accezione comune. [...] è un paradosso

o un ossimoro: novità che esclude il nuovo, utopia fondata, continuazione di una tradizione interrotta.’<sup>12</sup> Bottai’s statements are a clear example of the attitude assumed by most intellectuals in Italy after the war. Another significant statement in this respect is that made by Giuseppe Prezzolini in 1923 : ‘oggi trovo il futurismo morto, arcimorto in Italia. [...] I giovani [...] li trovi tutti alla reazione ; tutti leggono Leopardi e Manzoni ; tutti vogliono “costruire” ; tutti sentono il bisogno del buon senso, del lavoro serio, della prosa accurata e dignitosa.’<sup>13</sup> What seems to be a common perception among artists and intellectuals in the immediate post-war years is that the war’s “great conflagration” destroyed, in its purifying fire, a whole epoch, of which the avant-garde represented the artistic expression. However, the widespread feeling that the end of the war represents the beginning of a new era forces them to rethink the concepts of “new” and “modern”, since the ultimate modernity represented by the avant-garde has been superseded and it is now seen as inadequate to represent the new epoch. Avant-garde radicalism is therefore dismissed, as the whole of Europe undergoes a process of ‘return to order’. The “destruction of time” operated by the avant-garde (‘Il Tempo e lo Spazio morirono ieri’<sup>14</sup> is the futurists’ claim) with its rejection of the past and tradition is replaced by a process of “reconstruction of time” in which the quest for modernity is strictly interrelated with the dialogue with the past. Bottai’s phrase ‘continuare la tradizione’ is a clear indication that the retrieval of tradition is not meant to represent a step backward, but rather a movement forward in the name -if not of “progress”- of a continuity which incorporates Futurism as an element of confrontation together with the tradition which the “futurist revolution” had previously denied. The operation of “reconstruction” re-establishes the temporal *continuum* destroyed by the experience

of the avant-garde, but the temporal modality that it restores does not function according to the established modes of perception.

It could be said that, in terms of the definition of artistic modernity, the futurist avant-garde operated, to a certain extent, an act of self-destruction, in the sense that after the shattering of time a concept of modernity based on temporal progress could no longer be thought. The futurist avant-garde therefore almost consciously regarded itself as the end of an epoch. The event that represents the culmination and the end of such a process, both historically and artistically, is the war. After the war there is an attempt to recover the lost notion of temporal linearity through a process of re-establishment of links with the artistic past. However, in the post-war period artists are forced to confront the legacy of the destructive action of the avant-garde : if, therefore, to quote Peter Bürger, ‘through the avant-garde movements, the historical succession of techniques and styles has been transformed into a simultaneity of the radically disparate’<sup>15</sup>, and if the category of “succession” in aesthetic terms is no longer possible<sup>16</sup>, then artistic modernity is to be defined according to criteria different from those based on progression. In terms of the definition of the concept of modernity, one of the key concepts which undergo a process of questioning and revision is the concept of “the new”. In one of the fragments of his *Minima Moralia* Theodor Adorno presents an example of the post-avant-garde perception of the “new” and of modernity : as his composition teacher opposed dodecaphony, he tried to persuade his pupils to return to tonality by presenting atonality as old-fashioned. Adorno’s reflection is that

The ultramodern [...] was no longer modern, the stimulations I sought were already numb, the expressive figures that excited me belonged to an



outdated sentimentality [...] The modern has really become unmodern. Modernity is a qualitative, not a chronological category.<sup>17</sup>

Adorno's example serves as an indication that after the experience of the avant-garde, the "new" is no longer the parameter of modernity (and in this sense a certain version of modernity is considered obsolete): both the concept of "new" and "modern" are reinterpreted and, paradoxically, a certain definition of modernity, based on the concept of "the most advanced" is no longer sustainable. It is worth quoting Bürger in full :

If we sought to understand a change in the means of artistic representation, the category of the new would be applicable. But since the historical avant-garde movements cause a break with tradition and a subsequent change in the representational system, the category is not suitable for a description of how things are. [...]

The availability of and mastery over artistic techniques of past epochs<sup>18</sup> owed to the avant-garde movements make it virtually impossible to determine a historical level of artistic procedures. Through the avant-garde movements, the historical succession of techniques and styles has been transformed into a simultaneity of the radically disparate.<sup>19</sup>

The avant-garde has, therefore, shattered the notion of a linear progression in the succession of artistic procedures. In the Italian case, once, after the war, the avant-garde itself has been superseded and the concept of "new" can no longer be applied to successive forms of art, the idea of "modern" as "new" disappears and is replaced by other notions of the modern. From the aesthetic point of view the simultaneous availability of techniques and styles provided by the avant-garde revolution allows the possibility of resorting to the past in order to redefine the modern according to criteria which can now be unrelated to a notion of "the new" based on a progressive notion of time and modernity.

With regard to the redefinition of modernity in the post-war period, Tomasella notices that the key aesthetic notions defining avant-garde modernity undergo a process of neutralization and loss of their semantic connotation, to such an extent as to fundamentally question the existing idea of modernity, which is now defined according to such notions as *italianità*, *tradizione*, *sincerità*, *semplicità*, *popolarità*, *comprensibilità*.<sup>20</sup> As an example of such a redefinition Tomasella quotes Laura Malvano's description of the idea of modernity as developed by the artistic movement *Novecento* :

Differenziandosi nettamente dalla modernità praticata, e teorizzata, nell'area futurista [...], il Novecento suggeriva una diversa connotazione del termine : modernità come potenzialità dell'opera a una ricezione più ampia, meno dipendente dalla rigida settorialità della produzione artistica. La modernità coincideva, in questo caso, con la "comprensibilità dell'opera ad ogni mentalità"...<sup>21</sup>

Tomasella also points out that, while pre-war avant-garde movements are acutely aware of the character of contradiction and "laceration" contained in the notion of modernity, in the post-war period such laceration is concealed rather than exposed, as had previously happened with the avant-garde. The artists' main preoccupation seems to be the redefinition of their role within society and their redemption from their position of social "outcasts" through the possibility of a privileged access to the public. The reflection on art shifts therefore its focus from the internal language of art to the link between artist and public. The ultimate consequences of such a shift, in terms of the relationship between the artist and modernity, are, according to Tomasella, the abandonment of the "high-impact strategies" used by avant-garde artists, who were aware of the distance that separated them from the public; the crisis of the concept of progress and of the leading value of

the notion of the new; the retrieval of values related to the idea of tradition and therefore conceived of as “popular” and “anti-intellectual”.<sup>22</sup>

As the concept of progress collapses, the notion of modernity in aesthetic terms is gradually separated from that of technological and cultural “modernization”<sup>23</sup>, to such an extent that the representation of modernity in terms of progression or advancement promoted by the futurist avant-garde has become, by the early 1920s, obsolete, outdated, fundamentally *unmodern*.

How can modernity be, therefore, redefined once it has lost its character not only of projection into the future, but also partially of close connection with the present, as the aspects of transiency and contingency -to use Baudelaire’s words<sup>24</sup>- in the work of art are increasingly devalued, and more attention is devoted to what is considered the “eternal” and the “immovable” ? And how can a “new” modernity be recreated and presented in an atmosphere of “call for order” and “return to tradition”, which may be perceived as totally antimodern or reactionary? As Tomasella notices, after the war, modernity, having been ‘progressivamente privata delle connotazioni che l’avevano contraddistinta in epoca avanguardistica, [...] appare come una parola vuota che cerca un riempimento.’<sup>25</sup>

The solutions presented in the post-war Italian critical debates are various. Their multifaceted character is an indication of the complex interrelation of factors contributing to the elaboration of the concept. In post-war theorization of artistic modernity -as well as in the critical debates throughout the 1920s- two concepts seem to acquire pre-eminence, often being regarded as interrelated and providing a theoretical core for the construction of such a complex and sometimes ambiguous notion : the idea of nation and the concept of *classicità*.



As far the idea of nation is concerned, the concept of *nazionalismo modernista*, developed by the historian Emilio Gentile, offers a plausible explanation of the attempt to construct a notion of modernity based on the relationship between aesthetics and politics and on the use in the post-war period of the avant-garde legacy. In his book *Le origini dell'ideologia fascista* (first published in 1975<sup>26</sup>), he outlines the connections between aesthetics and politics in the pre-war avant-garde culture and how these connections are transferred to the definition of fascist ideology. In particular, he stresses the importance attributed by the avant-garde to the link between aesthetics and politics in the project of the so-called “conquest of modernity” :

la politicizzazione del modernismo italiano era iniziata molto prima del fascismo, e certamente contribuì a preparare il terreno per la sua nascita. Molto prima della nascita del fascismo, il futurismo aveva sostenuto la necessità di abbattere la barriera fra cultura e politica, attraverso la simbiosi fra cultura e vita, per risvegliare le energie intellettuali e morali degli italiani, dando ad essi un nuovo e più intenso e dinamico sentimento di italianità, e l'ambizione della conquista di nuovi primati in nome della grandezza della nazione, rinnovando e potenziando il paese con una accelerata opera di modernizzazione. Molto tempo prima della nascita del fascismo l'avanguardia modernista, costituita principalmente dal gruppo de “La Voce” e dal movimento futurista, aveva sostenuto che la cultura doveva esercitare la sua influenza sul rinnovamento della politica, per compiere la rigenerazione della nazione in modo da renderla capace di affrontare quella che abbiamo definito la *conquista della modernità*.<sup>27</sup>

The myth of the “conquest of modernity” is read by Gentile as an essential element in the cultural link between pre-war avant-garde and fascism.<sup>28</sup> He sees this myth as linked to the myth of “italianism”, present in different degrees in the cultural avant-garde movements at the beginning of the twentieth century and described as the conviction that Italy was destined for a leading role and a civilising mission in the

modern life of the new century. In order to achieve this it was necessary to start a process of national regeneration, from which a “new man” would be born.<sup>29</sup>

Present in Italian culture since the *Risorgimento*, this myth of conquest according to Gentile becomes predominant in the cultural climate of the early twentieth century, and manifests itself in an attitude described as of ‘accettazione delle forme di vita della civiltà moderna, rappresentate dalle scoperte scientifiche dallo sviluppo tecnologico, dall’accelerazione del ritmo del tempo, dal nuovo senso dinamico dell’esistenza.’<sup>30</sup> Although this enthusiastic attitude towards modernity is usually associated with the futurist avant-garde, Gentile claims that it is in fact common among intellectuals and avant-garde artists who define themselves as “anti-futurist”, like, for instance, many *vocianti*. The myth of the conquest of modernity is at the basis of nationalist modernism, which is characterized by an enthusiasm for modernity -interpreted as ‘espansione di energie umane e intensificazione della vita senza precedenti nella storia’<sup>31</sup>- and by what Gentile calls ‘un senso tragico e attivistico dell’esistenza’, which rejects any nihilistic attitude in favour of an active involvement in life and a positive attraction for the changes brought about by modernity. For the intellectuals involved in such a cultural climate modernity is interpreted as ‘epoca di crisi e di transizione da un sistema di valori, propri del mondo preindustriale, verso la formazione di una nuova civiltà, la costruzione della quale era affidata alla capacità dell’uomo moderno di dominare il proprio destino e plasmare il futuro’.<sup>32</sup>

The historian Walter Adamson points out that such a project of regeneration implies a central role for intellectuals. He argues that ‘the modernist strategy depended on a certain view of the social role of art’ and that a unifying factor among the various modernist<sup>33</sup> tendencies is certainly

a stress on the importance of “creativity”, one that rejected or at least strongly questioned any view of art as mimesis, a stress on the central role of art in the project of cultural regeneration, and a resolute denial of any normative boundary between “the arts” and society.<sup>34</sup>

Another important element which emerges from post-war theorization on the nature of aesthetic modernity is the increasing importance attributed to the public. The interest in expanding the potential for a wide reception of the work of art is connected on the one hand with the acknowledgement of the importance of the market as a parameter of modernity and on the other with the need to establish a link between the artist and the public. *Il Baretto*, for instance, is particularly sensitive to this issue: in an article published in February 1928 Arrigo Cajumi, attempting an analysis of the crisis affecting the novel as a genre in Italy, denounces the lack in Italian literature of a category of writers whom he calls ‘divulgatori secondari’, whose work could be accessible to the masses, and invokes a redefinition of the task of the critics who should promote both the Italian classics and foreign literature, paying special attention to the taste of the public.

Massimo Bontempelli, in his *Preamboli to 900*, proposes a “desacralized” notion of the literature for the new century, which he conceives as craft and profession and which should interact with the taste of the public, by understanding and dominating it. The aim of such a modern literature should be the supersession of a notion of literature centred on the “masterpiece” in favour of an art “of daily use”.

The notion of myth plays an important role in the project of cultural and national regeneration that the new literature aims to express, as it is opposed to the individualistic conception of art (in terms both of production and reception) which had characterized the previous century, and establishes a prominent role for art in the



redefinition of the nation in the new century. In this sense, Bontempelli's theorization contributes to contemporary redefinitions of modernity, by reinterpreting the concept, to use Tomasella's words, in terms of 'creazione di nuovi miti che consentano all'artista un contatto con le masse ; funzionalità dell'arte nel contesto sociale ; sorpresa che porta alla superficie la verità nascosta nella quotidianità.'<sup>35</sup>

In the context of simultaneous call for order and the redefinition of modernity, the notion of tradition itself undergoes a process of revision and problematization : the concept, however, is not problematized *per se*, but rather in relation to its previous dismissal by the avant-garde and to the developing and constantly shifting notion of modernity. Bottai's claim that 'bisogna seguire la tradizione' is significant of the need to rethink such a notion, but how is this tradition to be defined ? In 1923 Giuseppe Prezolini claims that in Italy tradition is so strong that the Italians are not even aware of its existence and he defines it as 'un clima al quale ci si assuefà ; un'aria che si respira, e che tutti trovano in sè, anche quando non vogliono'.<sup>36</sup> According to Prezolini, defining the concept of tradition is a difficult task, precisely because of its pervasive presence ('come si sa, è più difficile caratterizzare ciò che è comune, diffuso, generale [...] ; l'eccezione si nota e si afferra meglio della regola'<sup>37</sup>).

However, such a presence would explain why, even after a period of radical rejection of the artistic past (like that constituted by the avant-garde), tradition is resuscitated, despite the efforts to eliminate it. This definition of tradition would also provide an explanation for the post-war return to order and for the new tendency toward classicism which characterize contemporary Italian art. Prezolini maintains that

qui si trova la ragione per cui De Chirico e Carrà tornano a Mantegna e a Giotto, Soffici ai Veneti, Papini alla prosa regolare, la *Ronda* a Leopardi, Govoni al romanzo, Palazzeschi a Dante, e tutti son d'accordo in un po' di reazione, e magari di cattolicesimo, Dopo aver rotto con ogni regola e con ogni limite, l'italianità loro ha ripreso il sopravvento ; ed eccoli che stan ribadendo altri anelli della sacra catena.<sup>38</sup>

In Prezzolini's analysis of the post-war return to order, the movement towards a new classicism is not due to the experience of the war, but rather to the specificity of Italian literature and its intrinsically "classical" character. According to him the evolution of literature had had its culmination already before the war and could not have developed further :

Prendi la collezione de *Lacerba* [...] rilegata con tutte le carte futuriste di Soffici, a cerchi e semicircoli dai più violenti e contrastati colori, e vedrai che già nel 1913 il periodo di disgregazione della prosa italiana era giunto al massimo. Più in là non si poteva andare [...] La guerra fu l'occasione per riflettere e per liquidare quell'avventura [...] L'Italia è cambiata in questo, ma si sarebbe cambiata anche senza la guerra, perché strada non c'era.<sup>39</sup>

Beside the idea that the war represented the end of a process that had reached its climax, Prezzolini's analysis is based on the association of two main concepts whose constant interrelation is a fundamental feature in the debates on tradition throughout the 1920s, namely the association of the notion of tradition with the concept of *italianità*. In this sense he claims that Italy would have changed even without the war. The war once again is conceived as a "purifying" event, an occasion for reflection which has led to the quest for a lost "italianness". And, in Prezzolini's view, the return to tradition represents precisely the rediscovery of this concept. In particular, *italianità* is associated with a specific predisposition to classicism, which

has always characterized Italian literature and art and which -Prezzolini maintains- is caused by a series of factors. The first is a natural, innate, strong need for a “precise form”, which distinguishes Italian art from that of other countries, in particular the North-European ones : Prezzolini claims that ‘sembra che la mente italiana rifugga dalle concezioni e dalle opere vaporose e imprecise, che non ammetta quelle frange, quegli aloni, quell’interpenetrarsi di motivi e di idee che nel settentrione rendono così misterioso il fascino della letteratura.’<sup>40</sup> Such formal perfection is not carefully constructed through a model, as in France, but it has been present in the Italian spirit for centuries. For this reason Italian literature seems to bring everything to an ideal, more elevated atmosphere and when imagination is not sufficient to fulfil the artistic task ‘allora subentrano l’abilità, le regole apprese alla buona scuola, l’ordine esteriore, le finestre finte, i portici dipinti, le colonne di stucco.’<sup>41</sup> This particular quality of Italian literature also seems to explain why Italian literature is not ‘popolare’ : it is not popular because it is not “of the people”, but it traditionally comes from the upper classes (‘è una letteratura di classi superiori’), whether these were men of letters, nobles, priests or friars. Even today, although having become the domain of the bourgeoisie, literature preserves its old character of elitism, and this would explain the reason for the constant recurrence of such theories as that of “pure art”, which, for instance, characterizes the artistic principles of the *La Ronda* group, for which literature represents -in Prezzolini’s view- a challenge to the public and to themselves, a mere exercise, a proof of what they can achieve.

Other fundamental elements outlined by Prezzolini in his investigation of the prominence of the classical tendency in Italian art are : the constant presence in Italy and Italian culture of the ancient classical civilization, which makes it difficult to escape its influence, and the fact that Italy having been represented so many times by



the artists it is only possible to have an image of it which is mediated by artistic classicism. Prezzolini's analysis is significant as it uses the concept of *classicità* as the essence of the Italian tradition. This rereading of the notion of *classicità* becomes prominent in redefinitions of Italian tradition. The idea of the classical is deprived of its function as model and of a normative and definable content. Significant, in terms of this general, unprescriptive, notion of the classical is Benedetto Croce's 1917 essay *Il carattere di totalità dell'espressione artistica*, where he claims that

i grandi poeti e artisti [...] si riconoscono fratelli o che appartengano all'ottavo secolo avanti Cristo o al ventesimo dopo Cristo, o che vestano il greco peplo o il lucco fiorentino o il giubbone inglese o il bianco lino degli orientali ; e sono tutti classici, nel senso migliore della parola, che è, a mio avviso, in una particolare fusione del primitivo e del coltivato, della ispirazione e della scuola.<sup>42</sup>

The conclusion of the essay suggests that the idea of *classicità* is to be regarded as a general concept related to form, which also implies the notion of "true" and "real" art to be opposed to the "romantic disease".<sup>43</sup> In the preface to the second edition of *Porto Sepolto*, entitled *Verso un'arte nuova classica* (1919), Giuseppe Ungaretti seems to interpret classical art as a resuscitation and the retrieval of the "millenary life" of the word : 'fu un raccattare i frantumi dell'orologio per provare d'intenderne il congegno, per provare di rifargli segnare il tempo.'<sup>44</sup>

Giuliana Tomasella notices that during the Twenties and Thirties the notion of classical often refers not only to Greek and Roman art, but also and above all to the Italian *Quattrocento*, and that sometimes classical antiquity is valued only insofar as it is filtered through the art of the *quattrocentisti*. The scholar partially explains this tendency as due to the artists' feeling that Roman art is too close to Greek art to be the full expression of "italianness". It is only from the fourteenth century onwards

that Italy starts dominating the European artistic scene. The artists taken as points of reference are therefore Giotto, Masaccio and Piero Della Francesca. ‘Il mondo classico’ -Tomasella argues- ‘entra in tale sistema di valori solo indirettamente, di seconda mano, in quanto recuperato a nuova vita da quei grandi, cui spetta l’innegabile merito di aver fondato non solo l’arte italiana, ma quella occidentale moderna.’<sup>45</sup>

Some of the complexities and facets of the concept in the post-war period are outlined by Elena Pontiggia in her 1992 essay on the idea of the classical in Italy in the 1920s. Pontiggia distinguishes three tendencies within the notion of a “return to order” which characterizes the Twenties : traditionalism, modern *classicità* and new classicism. Traditionalism is characterized by the quest for an artistic form which would keep alive the relationship with the artistic past. Examples of this kind of attitude are identified in such critics as Ojetti, Thovez and Somarè. Tradition is interpreted by these critics in a broad sense which ranges from Romanticism to academicism. This tendency encompasses the return to order and to a notion of art as “craft” together with a certain nostalgia for nineteenth century realism and naturalism. The attitude of aversion to the notion of neo-classicism as passive repetition is accompanied by the need to still rely on the narrative techniques of the *ottocento*. In this respect such a tendency differs from that of the supporters of the creation of a “modern *classicità*” or of a new classicism, as they make nineteenth-century art a major target of their polemical attacks.

The theoreticians of “modern *classicità*” try to mediate classicism and modernity. What characterizes the “modern *classicità*” is the quest for an art that, although aspiring to the condition of *classicità*, can still partially retain the legacy of the avant-garde, and as a matter of fact those who promote such tendency have avant-

gardist backgrounds (Pontiggia includes in this category such artists and critics as Carrà, Sironi, Saffatti, Cardarelli and Bontempelli). These artists do not use the term “classicism” and they abhor the notion of “neo-classicism”, as they interpret it as fruitless imitation, preferring rather to develop a notion of *classicità* based on an idea of tradition as a legacy to be constantly appropriated and renewed.

As far as “new classicism” is concerned, its position is slightly different from that of “modern *classicità*”. Representatives of these tendency are identified as Severini and De Chirico. Their position is defined by Pontiggia as

una posizione teorica radicale, che non si proponeva di conciliare classico e moderno, quanto di vedere nel primo una lingua viva, universale, non imprigionata nella storia anche se di volta in volta incarnata in forme storiche. Il problema non era quindi quello di modernizzare quella lingua, ma di riprendere ad usarla dopo un periodo in cui era stata dimenticata o fraintesa, in cui era stata avversata o peggio archeologizzata, cioè usata come una lingua morta, un reperto.<sup>46</sup>

For this reason, these artists do not make any distinction between “classicism” and “classical” and their intention is not to use a specific epoch as a reference, but to re-establish a continuity in the artistic language.

In the literary field *La Ronda*’s project offers its own version of the concept of *classicità*. The *rondisti* attempt a reconciliation between classicism and modernity to be achieved through a return to the legacy of style handed down by the masters of tradition. They therefore interpret the classical tradition as a tradition of rigorous form and political disengagement, to be used against the excesses of pre-war experimentalism as a key to an “Italian” modernity.

The periodical *Valori Plastici* contains various interpretations of the notions of *classicità*. It is certainly possible to identify in the writings of Carlo Carrà the quest for a “modern *classicità*”, as a return to what he calls ‘i veri principi dell’arte’,



which are not to be interpreted as a set of models or a rigid canon, but as a “spiritual force” in constant tune with its time. In particular, Carrà reads this spiritual principle, which has the function of connecting the artist both with his time and with the artists that preceded him, as *italianismo* artistico, a principle which he describes as classical, precisely because classical is the Italian artistic frame of mind.

Giorgio De Chirico’s theorization, conducted in the same periodical, shows a slightly different attitude towards the notion of classical. His emphasis on the eternity of the laws of art prevents him from interpreting the concept in strongly nationalist terms and leads him to focus his attention on artistic technique.

Alberto Savinio, on the other hand, bases his theorization in *Valori Plastici* on a notion of *classicità* as the final and most accomplished stage of an artistic period. In particular, metaphysical art, represented by such artists as Carrà and De Chirico, represents the classical stage of an artistic process started by Cézanne. Although started in France, this process, which according to Savinio is of a spiritual nature, could only reach its classical stage in Italy, as Italy is almost “physiologically” predisposed to the classical. The classical phase represented by metaphysical painting is made to coincide with the end of the “French epoch” and the beginning of an epoch of primacy for Italian art, which started with the end of the war.

The debate on the art of the *Seicento*, hosted by *Valori Plastici* in 1921, synthesizes the main positions within the periodical on the issue of the redefinition of *classicità*. One of the most controversial positions resulting from the debate is that according to which the art of the *Seicento* represents the beginning of the decadence of Italian culture, caused by the penetration of a bourgeois mentality of North-European origin into the traditionally and almost “geographically” classical spirit of Italian art, epitomized by the “metaphysical”<sup>47</sup> beauty of fifteenth-century painting.

This position is shared within the debate by De Chirico, Margherita Sarfatti, Bontempelli and Suckert. Suckert in particular identifies the seventeenth century with a period of “decomposition” of the classical world, started in Europe by the Reformation, whose spirit, spreading from the North to the South of Europe, caused a cultural revolution.

Curt Erich Suckert, had fought in the war at a very early age,<sup>48</sup> had joined Fascism, by 1921 had published the pamphlet *La rivolta dei santi maledetti* on the retreat of Caporetto (initially written in 1919), and is beginning to establish itself as an original and independent political and historical essayist. The views expressed in the debate on the *Seicento* are successively developed by Suckert in *L'Europa vivente* (published by *La Voce* publishing house in 1923) and *L'Italia barbara*, significantly published in 1925 (under the name Curzio Malaparte) by Piero Gobetti, who, in the preface to the book, defines him ‘la più forte penna del fascismo’<sup>49</sup> In his contribution to the debate Suckert identifies the origins of modernity in the spirit animating the Protestant Reformation. According to him ‘la Riforma non è la nascita dello spirito critico moderno, d'impronta occidentale e nordica, ma il distacco di questo da quello spirito dogmatico, cattolico, d'impronta orientale e meridionale, che forma l'essenza della civiltà latina.’<sup>50</sup> The Reformation can therefore be considered as the beginning of what Malaparte calls ‘il dramma della modernità’ which has caused the progressive disintegration of the mediterranean, catholic civilization, gradually superseded by the northern Protestant “spirit”. Part of the “tragic” aspect of this supersession is due to a reversal in the perception of the values that each civilization represents :

nazioni un tempo floridissime e potenti sono oggi soverchiate e oscurate da altre già barbare e vilissime. Quella che un tempo era una falsa e barbarica concezione della vita, oggi detta le leggi della civiltà moderna. [...] Quel che la latinità aveva disprezzato e schernito come barbarico e empio, oggi trionfa e domina. [...] Le nazioni che un tempo erano barbare, oggi sono considerate civili, e quelle ch'erano civilissime hanno stima di barbare.<sup>51</sup>

Malaparte claims that the fact the Latin countries find themselves in a condition of inferiority if compared to the North-European ones is clear evidence that 'le nazioni latine sono improprie alla modernità, [...] sono rimaste antiche e [...] non potranno divenire moderne senza perdere la loro originalità storica'.<sup>52</sup> However, the modernity for which the southern countries are unsuitable is the specific version of modernity of Protestant origin, which has been imposed on them over the centuries. The Latin countries are not "immune" to modernity and certainly do not deny or reject progress. Their modernity, Malaparte maintains, is born from the principles of the Counter-Reformation, and it manifests itself as a spirit of "reaction" whose foundation is found in the catholic tradition :

pur mutando, per necessità di reazione alla Riforma, di direzione e di oggetto, lo spirito cattolico si è mantenuto entro i limiti delle sue giustificazioni storiche, sino a compiere, dalla seconda metà del Cinquecento ad oggi, un processo evolutivo proprio, indipendente da quello dello spirito nordico e occidentale, eretico...<sup>53</sup>

The notion of a "spirit of the Counter-Reformation", as a trans-historical concept constituting a force of reaction against the process of modernity started by the Reformation is associated by Malaparte with the idea of "classical order" as a fundamental element of the Mediterranean civilization. The spirit of the Counter-Reformation is therefore the southern response to the invasion of North-European culture and it represents a specifically "Latin" modernity, rooted in the Italian,





classical, catholic tradition. Its force has been at the root of all the culture of “reaction” in Italy since the beginning of the seventeenth century and justifies, for instance, eighteenth century academicism, which is seen as a reaction to the critical spirit of the Enlightenment, ‘forma prima e confusa di romanticismo’ : ‘a noi sembra’ -Malaparte claims- ‘che si deve a Rousseau e a tutta l’Enciclopedia se Goldoni e l’Alfieri sono gli accademici della Commedia dell’Arte.’<sup>54</sup>

Fascism is, according to Malaparte, an expression of the spirit of the Counter-Reformation. Its ultimate value and meaning lie ‘in questa sua storicissima funzione di restauratore dell’antico ordine classico dei nostri valori nazionali.’<sup>55</sup>

The notion of *classicità*, conceived as the fundamental feature of the mediterranean tradition, is transferred by Malaparte into regional culture, thereby becoming an element of the cult of ruralism which characterizes certain sections of the fascist supporters. It is such a notion, for instance, which allows Tuscan rural culture to be defined as classical and Malaparte to define Ardengo Soffici as ‘classico’, precisely because he belongs to that Tuscan environment :

tu sei classico, Soffici mio, sei antico e intellettuale come siamo tutti noialtri toscani. [...] Le tue qualità sono toscane, propriamente toscane, d’intelletto, non di cuore. [...] [Noi Toscani] siamo grandi e temibili appunto per questa nostra aridità di cuore, per questa nostra asciuttezza di sentimento, per questa nostra magica e sovrana libertà e serenità d’intelletto, che fa di noi i più fieri nemici di tutto il mondo moderno, di tutto il mondo romantico, i nemici di ogni specie di romanticismo, e d’altre simili novità barbariche ; i più antichi, i più classici uomini d’Italia.<sup>56</sup>

The reconciliation between *classicità* and ruralism could be said to be the core of the *Strapaese* cultural project, promoted by the periodical *Il Selvaggio* from 1926. The task the *selvaggi*, led by Maccari, Soffici and Malaparte, set for themselves is to

propose a version of “healthy” Italian modernity, based on the retrieval and preservation of the fundamentally Italian “classical” spirit and on its rural tradition, which they oppose to what they perceive as corrupt and corrupting modernity, born from the spirit of the Reformation and manifesting itself in bourgeois liberalism and metropolitan, internationalist culture. The ruralism of such movements as *Strapaese* is in tune with the anti-bourgeois stance of fascist culture. In particular, the *selvaggi* establish a constant equation: Italian culture and tradition are for them the equivalent of anti-bourgeois and are therefore essentially fascist, fascism being described as an intrinsically Italian phenomenon.

Modernity is not rejected by these movements, it is rather reinterpreted according to the development of a specific tradition. What is rejected therefore is not progress in technological terms, but rather its ideological basis and the imported culture accompanying it, which is perceived as alien to the Italian tradition. If it is true that it is impossible *not* to be modern, the issue is then to be posed in terms of what are the parameters chosen to define modernity, as an artist such as Ardengo Soffici, who is particularly sensitive to these issues, points out: ‘Si tratta di sapere’ – he argues- ‘che tradizione ogni popolo sviluppa ; e [...] nel caso nostro è chiaro come il nord sviluppi quella razionalistica, critica del protestantesimo, e noi la tradizione spiritualistica, poetica, creativa del cattolicesimo...’<sup>57</sup> Within the latter tradition the function of fascism is identified by Soffici with the restoration of *italianità*. He claims that

definire [...] e predicare il Fascismo come un movimento di antiriforma equivale ad attribuirgli il compito più chiaro, più naturale, più alto e più glorioso che mai si potesse: equivale a spalancargli le porte verso la totale restaurazione dell’italianità, anzi della latinità, che è quanto dire dell’universalità o cattolicità.<sup>58</sup>

Fascism is therefore considered to be part of a movement of restoration of the lost spirit of *italianità* that has its origins in the Counter-Reformation. Its “reactionary” character is interpreted as the “reaction” against the corrupting intrusion of foreign culture, rather than as a form of conservatism or regression. As fascist culture appropriates the quest for a recovery of the true Italian identity, it is within this quest that it elaborates its own version of modernity. According to Emilio Gentile

Il fascismo ebbe una propria visione della modernità che si contrapponeva alla cultura, all’ideologia, allo stile della modernità liberale, socialista e comunista, e rivendicò a sé la pretesa di imporre la propria formula di modernità al XX secolo. In questo senso si può parlare di “modernismo fascista”.<sup>59</sup>

In his study on the nature of fascism Roger Griffin defines fascism as an alternative form of modernism rather than a rejection of modernity. He claims that the palingenetic and anti-conservative character of fascism, together with its drive towards the creation of a new society prevents a literal restoration of the past, drawing on epochs of healthy national history only to nourish the regenerative ethos which should be at the basis of national rebirth. For this reason, even in the case of Fascism’s anti-urbanism and its nostalgia for the pre-industrial world, it is what is considered as the degenerate aspects of modern age which is rejected.<sup>60</sup> Significant, in this respect, is the following statement by Soffici:

è l’idea del progresso che noi rifiutiamo, non i risultati materiali, pratici dell’attività scientifica. E’ lo spirito di modernità futurista che i popoli anglosassoni identificavano con la civiltà, che noi neghiamo, non il fatto di un ritrovato o di una scoperta che possono arricchire o facilitare la



nostra vita giornaliera. Così sono i valori spirituali essenziali antichi che noi difendiamo e che dovremo far di tutto per ripristinare, non le forme esteriori di un mondo in cui non potremmo tornare a vivere, e dove ci sarebbe impossibile di vivere.<sup>61</sup>

In his speech at the Academy of Perugia Mussolini himself, after having declared the historical importance of art in the process of civilization of a society, claims that it is now necessary to have the rebirth of ‘una grande arte che può essere tradizionalista ed al tempo stesso moderna’.<sup>62</sup> The element of traditionalism is therefore here counterbalanced by the quest for modernity. Such a quest is confirmed in the speech by Mussolini’s invitation to create rather than imitate, in order not to exploit an old heritage : fascist art should be the “new” art for “new” epoch.

A very close link is therefore identifiable between artistic and political modernity. Walter Adamson underlines the importance of such a link, as he identifies the roots of fascist ideology in the pre-war avant-garde movements. In particular he relates the pursuit of a fascist cultural identity to the pre-war modernist project :

Like Mussolini, the modernists generally were from a generation of frustrated intellectuals, desirous of keeping their own threatened social role intact while building a new culture of modernity. [...] Mussolini built fascist culture as an extension -or clarification- of the modernist project. Moreover, this extension was completely plausible since the project itself was so open-ended and politically unspecified, and since its basic impulses and Mussolini’s were the same : to spiritualize the world without losing the power of modernity. That is why the modernists never failed to recognize their own image in fascism.<sup>63</sup>

The scholar Michela Nacci stresses the fundamentally optimistic character of fascism, which functions as an ideological reaction to the ‘cultura della crisi’ expressed by Oswald Spengler’s *The Decline of the West*. According to Nacci, some

aspects of Spengler's vision (such as the sense of the decline of a civilization, anti-modernism, anti-materialism, rejection of the machine, the acknowledgement of the masses, and the projection into the future with a constant eye to the past) are present in fascism. However, Nacci argues that

a questo punto però la cultura della crisi terminava di svolgere la sua funzione, e lo spenglerismo veniva respinto per il suo pessimismo e il suo fatalismo : il fascismo ottimista e attivistico si poneva come la soluzione della crisi della civiltà, la creazione di una civiltà nuova che avrebbe preso il posto di quella occidentale al tramonto.<sup>64</sup>

The palingenetic, regenerative stance of fascist ideology counteracts therefore the notion of the general crisis of civilization with the conviction that the rise of fascism coincided with the beginning of an epoch of national rebirth and with the will to create a new civilization.

From the literary and artistic point of view, the *Critica Fascista* debate on fascist art constitutes an effective synthesis on the one hand of the issues concerning the interrelation of the concepts of tradition and modernity and on the other of the process of appropriation, absorption and elaboration of pre-fascist artistic debates within initial definitions of fascist culture. The various contributions show clearly that the common intention of the artists participating in the project of shaping the cultural identity of the new regime is to prevent the creation of a state art. In this sense, fascist art is defined as the recovery and expression of the true Italian spirit rather than a regimented category.

The Italian spirit that new art should aim to represent is equated to the spirit of *classicità* throughout the centuries, which is detached from the notion of classical antiquity and acquires a trans-historical, political-artistic value. The “classical” is in

fact opposed to the “romantic” as the essence of catholic *latinità* against North-European culture of Protestant inspiration. The general conviction of being the artificers of a new epoch results in the recovery of the Italian classical tradition in the name of a new, national modernity, which is presented as the Italian alternative to bourgeois, liberal, progressive modernity and as opposed to a notion of classicism as academicism.

The artistic modernity represented by Futurism is generally rejected in the process of defining the features of fascist art, as it is seen as fundamentally obsolete, romantic and unsuitable to represent the spirit of the new Italy. Significant, in this respect, is the fact that the futurist contributions to the debate present Futurism as an Italian phenomenon, in tune with Mussolini’s improvisatory and anti-cultural temperament. The concepts of nation and national are therefore at the centre of every redefinition of tradition and modernity within fascist ideology. In this context, even Bontempelli’s europeanism is to be read within the framework of palingenetic nationalism.

Finally, the central role of the concept of the nation in the debates on tradition and modernity seems to be challenged only by intellectual groups actively contesting the pervasiveness of fascist culture (such as that represented, for instance, by Piero Gobetti’s *Il Baretti*) or by cultural projects whose political disengagement represents in itself a form of detachment from the general cultural atmosphere (such as the case of *Solaria*). In the case of *Il Baretti* the return of tradition is related not so much to the need to retrieve a lost notion of *italianità*, but rather to find a reference point in the Italian cultural tradition which could be used as a model of rationality and of europeanism against the domineering irrationality and nationalism of the time. It is precisely the tradition of the Enlightenment, rejected by the apologists of classical



*italianità*, which is retrieved and appropriated by this intellectual group as an alternative to contemporary culture. The reference to the culture of *illuminismo* implies also a concept of “enlightened” modernity, which finds correspondence in the wider context of contemporary European literature. Such a notion of modernity, which is inherited a few years later by a periodical such as *Solaria* and it is partially shared by such an important author as Luigi Pirandello, presents itself in sharp contrast to the optimistic myth of regenerative palingenesis promoted by fascist culture. It seems rather to share elements of that “culture of crisis” which fascism aims at counteracting. For these intellectuals the modern condition, far from being interpretable in any optimistic fashion, is often read as twilight and chaos. The major artistic exponents of this idea of modernity are seen as such authors as Joyce, Proust, Svevo, Saba, Montale and Pirandello. Safeguarding national tradition and expressing modernity are therefore two simultaneous operations, defined by the capacity to relate artistically to the contemporary existential as well as cultural situation and to situate one’s work within a scope that transcends the boundaries of the nation and inserts itself in the wider context of the cultural tradition of Europe.

<sup>1</sup> Giuseppe Bottai, 'Progressismo e Futurismo', in *La Politica delle arti. Scritti 1918-1942* (Roma : Editalia, 1992), p. 64.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 64-65.

<sup>3</sup> Cfr. the *Carteggio Bottai-Marinetti*, in *La politica delle arti*, pp. 316-320.

<sup>4</sup> Luciano De Maria, Introduction to *Per conoscere Marinetti e il futurismo* (Milano: Mondadori, 1973), p. XVIII.

<sup>5</sup> G. Battista Nazzaro, *Introduzione al futurismo* (Napoli: Guida, 1984), p. 125.

<sup>6</sup> Cfr. Filippo Tommaso Marinetti, 'Futurismo e fascismo', in *Teoria e invenzione futurista*, ed. by Luciano De Maria (Milano: Mondadori, 1968), pp. 495-498.

<sup>7</sup> Luciano De Maria, Introduction to *Teoria e invenzione futurista*, p. XLIII.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>9</sup> Luciano De Maria, Introduction to *Per conoscere Marinetti e il futurismo*, p. XIX.

<sup>10</sup> Luciano De Maria, Introduction to *Teoria e invenzione futurista*, p. LIX.

<sup>11</sup> Cfr. Peter Bürger, *Theory of the Avant-Garde*, trans. by Michael Shaw (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1984), particularly pp. 47-54.

<sup>12</sup> Giuliana Tomasella, *Avanguardia in crisi nel dibattito artistico fra le due guerre* (Padova : CLUEP, 1995), p. 157.

<sup>13</sup> Giuseppe Prezzolini, *La coltura italiana* (Firenze : La Voce, 1923), pp. 14-15.

<sup>14</sup> Filippo Tommaso Marinetti, 'Fondazione e Manifesto del Futurismo Pubblicato dal "Figaro" di Parigi il 20 febbraio 1909', in *Marinetti e i futuristi*, ed. by Luciano De Maria and Laura Dondi (Milano : Garzanti, 1994), p. 6.

<sup>15</sup> Peter Bürger, *Theory of the Avant-Garde*, p. 63.

<sup>16</sup> Cfr. *Theory...*, p. 63 : 'no movement in the arts today can legitimately claim to be historically more advanced as art than any other.'

<sup>17</sup> Theodor Adorno, *Minima Moralia. Reflections from Damaged Life*, translated by E.F.N. Jephcott (London: Verso, 1978), pp. 217-218.

<sup>18</sup> Bürger gives Magritte as an example of use of old-masterly techniques in an avant-garde context.

<sup>19</sup> *Theory...*, pp. 62-63.

<sup>20</sup> *Avanguardia...*, p. 115.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 155.

<sup>23</sup> The concept of cultural modernization is not easily definable. In his attempt to identify the beginning of cultural modernization in Italy David Forgacs suggests some possible definitions. Starting with the acknowledgement of the fact that there is a 'lack of general consensus about what cultural modernization means and when it happened in Italy', he then proceeds : 'it is common to speak of modern mass culture as having "arrived" with the economic boom of the fifties and sixties bringing in its wake what Pier Paolo Pasolini, writing in 1974-75, saw as an "anthropological revolution", a break-up of old ideologies and class identities and and a new cultural homogenisation around a petty-bourgeois consumerist ethos. But it is also common to see the 1930s with the building of the radio network, the importation of Hollywood films, jazz and swing and the advent of glossy magazines, as a period of cultural modernization under the repressive tutelage of Fascism. And some accounts would date it even further back : to the first wave of industrialisation at the turn of the century and the rise of a modern newspaper press'. *Italian Culture in the Industrial Era* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1990), pp. 1-2.

<sup>24</sup> In his essay 'The painter of modern life' Baudelaire defines modernity as 'the transient, the fleeting, the contingent ; it is one half of art, the other being the eternal and the immovable'. ('The painter of modern life', in *Selected Writings on Art and Literature*, ed. by P.E. Charvet, London : Penguin, 1992, p. 403). Various artists, such as, for instance, Ardengo Soffici, are indebted to Baudelaire's definition of modernity.

<sup>25</sup> *Avanguardia in crisi...*, p. 157.

<sup>26</sup> The 1996 edition has been consulted for this thesis.

<sup>27</sup> Emilio Gentile, *Le origini dell'ideologia fascista* (Bologna: Il Mulino, 1996), p. 30.

<sup>28</sup> Cfr. *Le origini...*, pp. 30-45. See also, E. Gentile, 'The conquest of modernity : From modernist nationalism to fascism', *Modernism/Modernity*, 1 (1994), 55-87.

<sup>29</sup> Cfr. *Le origini...*, pp. 30-31.

<sup>30</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 31.

<sup>31</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 32.

<sup>32</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 34.



<sup>33</sup> Adamson makes no particular theoretical distinction between modernism and avant-garde. The terms “modernism” and “modernist” are therefore used here in the same sense as that used by Adamson, since they refer to his work. The category “modernism”, however, is not used in this thesis to indicate the culture of the period between the end of the nineteenth century and the beginning of World War I, as such a category is not usually found in the Italian critical tradition.

<sup>34</sup> Walter Adamson, ‘Modernism and Fascism. The Politics of Culture in Italy, 1903-1922’, *American Historical Review*, 95 (1990), p. 366.

<sup>35</sup> *Avanguardia in crisi...*, p. 157.

<sup>36</sup> *La coltura...*, p. 4.

<sup>37</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>38</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>39</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 14.

<sup>40</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 5.

<sup>41</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 9.

<sup>42</sup> ‘La totalità dell’espressione artistica’, in *Filosofia. Poesia. Storia* (Milano e Napoli: Ricciardi, 1955), p. 246.

<sup>43</sup> ‘gli artisti veri attingeranno pur sempre la verità integrale e la classicità della forma, come, durante il corso del secolo decimonono, nell’imperversare del morbo, hanno saputo i grandi di cui si onora la letteratura moderna, da Goethe e Foscolo e Manzoni e Leopardi, a Tolstoi e Maupassant e Ibsen e Carducci.’ (‘La totalità...’, p. 247)

<sup>44</sup> ‘Verso un’arte nuova classica’, in *Vita d’un uomo. Saggi e interventi* (Milano: Mondadori, 1974), p. 15.

<sup>45</sup> *Avanguardia in crisi...*, pp. 127-128.

<sup>46</sup> Elena Pontiggia, ‘Classicismo, tradizionalismo, moderna classicità’, in *L’idea del classico 1916-1932. Temi classici nell’arte italiana degli anni Venti*, ed. by Elena Pontiggia and Marco Quemada (Milano : Fabbri, 1992), p. 43.

<sup>47</sup> The term “metaphysical” is here used in the specific meaning given to the term by De Chirico and the theorists of metaphysical painting (cfr. chapter 2 of this thesis).

<sup>48</sup> Suckert was born in 1898 and in 1914, at the age of sixteen, he run away from home to enlist in the *Legione garibaldina* and fight in the Argonne.

<sup>49</sup> Gobetti’s preface is reported in the bibliographical appendix of Curzio Malaparte, *L’Europa vivente e altri saggi politici (1921-1931)*, ed. by Enrico Falqui (Firenze : Vallecchi, 1961), p. 653.

<sup>50</sup> ‘L’Europa vivente’, in *L’Europa vivente e altri saggi politici (1921-1931)*, p. 358.

<sup>51</sup> ‘L’Europa vivente’, pp. 364. The opposition between Italian and Northern European culture was already promoted before the war by the Florentine avant-garde. Significant in this respect is Giovanni Papini’s article ‘Futurismo e marinettismo’, published in the periodical *Lacerba* in 1915, where the Florentine futurists distance themselves from Marinetti’s followers and create the distinction between Futurism and what they call *Marinettismo*. In this article Papini attributes the positive quality of ‘latinità’ to Futurism, as opposed to *Marinettismo*’s negative ‘americanismo’ and ‘germanismo’. (Cfr. Giovanni Papini, ‘Futurismo e marinettismo’, in *Per conoscere Marinetti e il futurismo*, pp. 283-286).

<sup>52</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 365.

<sup>53</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 375.

<sup>54</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 376-377.

<sup>55</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 380. The term *accademico* is given by Malaparte a negative connotation and is interpreted as “conventional”, “over-formal”. The terms *accademico*, *accademia*, *accademismo* are often used in this negative sense by the representatives of the *cultura militante*.

<sup>56</sup> ‘Italia Barbara’, in *L’Europa Vivente*, pp. 589-590. This section of *Italia Barbara*, entitled *Ragguaglio sullo stato presente degli intellettuali rispetto alle cose d’Italia*, was initially published (under Malaparte’s real name Curt Suckert) as an introduction to Ardengo Soffici’s *Battaglia tra due vittorie* (1923). For this reason in the essay Malaparte addresses Soffici directly.

<sup>57</sup> Preface to Curt Suckert’s first edition of *L’Europa vivente : teoria storica del sindacalismo nazionale* (1923), now in *L’Europa vivente*, p. 652.

<sup>58</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 648.

<sup>59</sup> *Le origini...*, p. 40.

<sup>60</sup> Cfr. Roger Griffin, *The Nature of Fascism* (London and New York: Routledge, 1993), p. 47.

<sup>61</sup> Preface to Suckert’s *L’Europa Vivente*, pp. 651-652.

<sup>62</sup> Benito Mussolini, ‘Arte e civiltà’, in *Scritti e discorsi* (Milano: Hoepli, 1934), vol. 5, p. 427. The speech was originally delivered at the Academy of Fine Arts in Perugia on 5 October 1926.



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<sup>63</sup> Walter Adamson, 'Modernism and Fascism', p. 390.

<sup>64</sup> Michela Nacci, 'La crisi della civiltà : fascismo e cultura europea', in *Tendenze della filosofia italiana nell'età del fascismo*, ed. by Ornella Pompeo Faracovi (Livorno : Belforte, 1985), p. 47.

## Chapter 2

### TOWARDS THE DEFINITION OF A MODERN *CLASSICITA'*: THE FORMS OF ORDER

The periodicals *Valori Plastici* and *La Ronda* can be seen as representative of the form taken in Italy by the post-war “return to order”. Although *Valori Plastici* concentrates on the visual arts, whereas *La Ronda* is specifically devoted to literature, the two periodicals have been considered similar in many respects : they were both published in Rome during the same period<sup>1</sup>, they share some of the same contributors (Alberto Savinio, Carlo Carrà and Giorgio De Chirico contribute to *La Ronda*, while Emilio Cecchi and Riccardo Bacchelli write articles for *Valori Plastici*) and they seem to belong to the same movement towards the restoration of artistic order and the retrieval of a notion of art (both literary and visual) as *mestiere*, against the corruption of technique and style promoted by the experimental and anti-traditionalist attitude of the avant-garde. Luisa Mangoni traces the artistic programmes of both *Valori Plastici* and *La Ronda* back to the separation between politics and culture promoted by Giuseppe De Robertis in the so-called *Voce bianca* between 1914 and 1916, and identifies the core of the *Valori Plastici/La Ronda* projects in the periodical *La Raccolta*, published in Bologna between 1918 and 1919, whose main contributors are Raimondi, Cardarelli, Bacchelli, Carrà, Ungaretti, De Chirico, Savinio, Montano, and Soffici.<sup>2</sup> The scholar maintains that the fact that two

periodicals were born from *La Raccolta* –one devoted exclusively to the visual arts and one devoted to literature- is part of the notion of “return to order”, ‘quasi ad affermare, dopo la separazione tra politica e cultura, anche quella all’interno dell’arte per un ritorno ad uno specifico individuale non intercambiabile.’<sup>3</sup> Although such an evaluation is slightly too generic and does not reflect the differences and complexities that characterize the specific position of each journal in relation to the concept of “order” (not to mention the constant exchange of views on both art and literature among the various intellectuals that contribute to both periodicals), it is certainly true that the concept of artistic and political “order” –variously defined- is central to the artistic programme of the two periodicals.

Both *Valori Plastici* and *La Ronda* base their cultural programme on the critique of the conception of modernity associated with the avant-garde and on the retrieval and redefinition of the notion of “classical”, particularly as identified with the idea of “italianness”. Both *La Ronda* and *Valori Plastici*, therefore, claim to be “classical”. However, it has been noted that the approach to the concept of classicism of *Valori Plastici* differs from that of *La Ronda*, since

se il classicismo degli artisti metafisici [i.e. the *Valori Plastici* group] è tutto schiacciato sul presente, tutt’altro insomma che passatista, in un attrito nevralgico con la contemporaneità e in clima di reale sperimentazione, il classicismo dei letterati rondeschi sembra più una rendita sul grande latifondo della classicità di tradizione, enfiato in nostalgia, in regressione.<sup>4</sup>

Nonetheless, although the approach to the notion of “classical” presents differences between the two periodicals, it is possible to say that they both try to redefine this notion in the context of the post-war call for order and consequent return to tradition. In particular, they both link the return to tradition with the



necessity of defining the elements of a *classicità* conceived as the essence of “italianness”, against an avant-gardist conception of art which is increasingly associated on the one hand with “Bolshevik” art and on the other with north-European liberal, bourgeois culture. In addition, the sense of renewal coinciding with the beginning of a new epoch makes it possible for both projects to identify their programmes of the pursuit of classical forms with the quest for a “new” modernity which strongly questions all the definitions of the modern existing before the war. Thus, although promoting a return to tradition both *Valori Plastici* and *La Ronda*, in fact, regard their project as “modern”, thereby representing clear examples of the problematization of the concept of artistic modernity in the immediate post-war years. The various versions of the “classical” they present are an indication of the many facets and meanings this concept acquires in the post-war literary and artistic theorization.

**“Return to tradition” and the politics of form : *Valori Plastici***

La sola questione che ci interessa : lo sviluppo e l'affermazione  
dell'esaltazione dello spirito moderno -in una parola- l'arte moderna.  
(Alberto Savinio)

*Pictor classicus sum.*  
(Giorgio De Chirico)

As far as the importance of the periodical *Valori Plastici*<sup>5</sup> for the Italian culture of the 1920s is concerned, the Luisa Mangoni argues that

attraverso Carrà, Morandi, ma principalmente Soffici, essa [la pittura metafisica] filtrava nella vicenda pittorica del Selvaggio di Maccari, e contribuiva ad allargare e modificare l'orizzonte strapaesano; riassorbita e rimeditata da Bontempelli, divenne nel 1926 il fondamento del gruppo di 900; fraintesa e ridotta a puro e semplice neoclassicismo fu alla base, attraverso Spadini e Ogetti, del novecentismo pittorico, che sin dal 1923 [...] poneva la sua candidatura ad arte del regime fascista.<sup>6</sup>

Although Mangoni's assessment of such filiations from the theorization carried out by *Valori Plastici* is to some extent debatable (for instance, although the 900 movement, led by Massimo Bontempelli, is certainly indebted to the theoretical basis of metaphysical painting, it cannot be said that it constitutes its foundation, and the reduction of the *Novecento* movement to the simple neo-classical version of metaphysical painting is, to say the least, restrictive), there nonetheless is no doubt that the aesthetic theories developed by *Valori Plastici* in the field of visual art (particularly by Carlo Carrà, Giorgio De Chirico and Alberto Savinio) have a considerable influence on literary and artistic theorization in the 1920s.

The genesis of the *Valori Plastici* project should be traced back to the meeting of De Chirico, Carrà and Savinio in Ferrara in 1917. After spending a few years in

Paris, De Chirico and Savinio had come back to Italy in 1915. Since 1910 De Chirico had started pursuing his “metaphysical” visions, (particularly significant in these years are the “Enigmas”, painted between 1910 and 1914, the paintings on Melancholy, Nostalgia, Mystery, Disquiet<sup>7</sup>, and the “metaphysical interiors”).<sup>8</sup> Carrà, on the other hand, for a few years had been a leading figure of futurist painting. He had co-written, (together with Boccioni, Russolo, Balla and Severini) the *Manifesto dei pittori futuristi* and *La pittura futurista*, and (together with Marinetti, Boccioni and Russolo) *Contro Venezia passatista*. He had also written *Piani plastici come espansione sferica nello spazio* and *La pittura dei suoni, rumori e odori* (both published in *Lacerba* in 1913). However, during the war years, he had grown increasingly uncomfortable with the ideas and forms of futurist painting, despite having played a major role in their definition. In 1916 he had published in *La Voce* the two essays, *Parlata su Giotto* and *Paolo Uccello costruttore*, which had marked his detachment from the aesthetics of Futurism and expressed his increasing preoccupation with finding a synthesis between tradition and modernity through the recovery of pictorial *plasticità*.<sup>9</sup> As regards his futurist experience, in 1916 he had claimed: ‘Per me l’arte è una continua ricerca, ed è una continua crisi spirituale, che scopre il suo equilibrio. L’equilibrio non è, e non può essere, assoluto, ma rimanere immobili su di una teoria della *mobilità* ad oltranza, mi sembra per lo meno puerile. Il futurismo non fu che una di queste crisi.’<sup>10</sup> The meeting with De Chirico had resulted for Carrà in a turn to metaphysical painting as a way of expressing ‘l’indole lirica del trascendentalismo plastico’. To quote Joan Lukach, Carrà ‘sought to be precisely what he discovered in De Chirico, a brilliant formal innovator who did not destroy the legibility of objects.’<sup>11</sup>

*Valori Plastici*, edited by the art critic and collector Mario Broglio and



published between 1918 and 1922, aims at proposing, as the title itself suggests, a return to the Italian tradition of *plasticità*. The periodical has been defined by the scholar Paolo Fossati ‘la presenza più importante e più significativa dell’intera cultura figurativa nell’arco fra anni dieci e venti’<sup>12</sup>, devotes most of its critical work to contemporary visual arts. Fossati points out that *Valori Plastici* is published in a period of transition, characterized by the crisis of the avant-garde, the rejection of artistic and linguistic experimentation, and a general quest for reflection and restoration. Not only is the periodical published over the crucial period between 1918 and 1922, but ‘lo identifica e gli dà corpo con una autorità e una incisività sconosciuta agli altri documenti d’epoca’<sup>13</sup>. The scholar summarizes the aim of the periodical as follows:

si vuole riaffermare la concezione dell’arte come esperienza dell’Italia e della sua tradizione, attraverso l’*azione* di un gruppo eterogeneo per formazione, assertore della crisi della modernità così come si è affermata nella esperienza delle avanguardie inizio secolo, e propugnatore di una alternativa in nome di un nuovo, o di un rinnovato classicismo, e di un completo distacco da ogni impegno pratico, sociologico o politico che sia. [...]

*Valori Plastici*, come *La Ronda*, mirava a risolvere un clima di incertezze e di attese con la forza di un progetto che nelle categorie formali di proprietà, di medietà, di equilibrio, di ordine, di misura, trovava ispirazione a un’arte, a una moralità, a un’attenzione all’arte sentita come tradizione, come continuità etnica e storica italiana senza sbandamenti avanguardistici, sperimentali, esterofili.<sup>14</sup>

Fossati’s interpretation of the *Valori Plastici* project seems to imply that the concept of artistic order promoted by the group is related to a “moral” value attributed to art, which, with its quest for harmony, balance and tradition, would offer a counterbalancing action in a moment of political uncertainty. However, an analysis of *Valori Plastici*’s quest for a return to tradition and for the creation of a “true”

Italian modernity, reveals a “disquiet” and sense of unease within the group, that seems partially to refute the scholar’s interpretation.

From both the aesthetic and, to some extent, the political point of view, the unifying factor within the *Valori Plastici* group is the rejection of Futurism (and the avant-garde in general) as a failed experience, whose relative significance ended with the war’s “great conflagration”. As Mangoni points out, after the war Futurism is rejected as an experience of possible theoretical validity not only on aesthetic grounds, but also for its political implications, as it is by then heavily associated with the Russian revolution.<sup>15</sup> Significant, in this respect, is Alberto Savinio’s statement in the first issue of the journal :

Prima d’intaccare la questione *arte* si pronunci il *credo* dell’antisocialismo:

Fra gli uomini corrono disuguaglianze. La società esiste solo in quanto materia - moralmente non è che un’opinione. L’opinione della società - opinione pubblica- non esiste. Le ragioni dei singoli, insieme riunite, non formano affatto una monade - l’unità intima di un corpo compatto: rimangono bensì una massa diafana e molecolare senza contorni, senza freni, senza frontiere. Tuttavia, l’opinione pubblica è di una elasticità meravigliosa: cangiante, volteggiante, prismatica. E’ un faro senza luce, giacché nella realtà non illumina. Davanti la possibilità d’ogni nuovo evento essa vi s’imposta con una nuova sua faccia. E’ di un opportunismo così comodo quanto involontario.

Lo stesso gioco in politica: La storia insegna!<sup>16</sup>

The article containing this statement is entitled *Arte = Idee Moderne* : if the concept of art as such is equated to modern ideas, the redefinition of “modern” in art is to some extent linked to the political stance of the artist. As a consequence, part of the artistic task is to define “the modern”, not only as an aesthetic but also as an ideological concept. Savinio’s concept of modernity claims for art a cognitive function : the artistic genius will, in the future, be defined as “philosophical”, ‘nel senso autentico di questa parola, di *amico della conoscenza*’.<sup>17</sup> In order to give art a



philosophical status in the sense proposed by Savinio it is necessary for it to abandon aestheticism. The rejection of aestheticism in favour of the representation of the *drammaticità* of modern life is the main feature of modern painting; Cubism, however, still struggles between *drammaticità* and aestheticism, while Futurism seems to focus exclusively on *drammaticità* as such. Only with Giorgio De Chirico, Savinio claims, has the mystery of modern *drammaticità* been penetrated. De Chirico in fact ‘mette a nudo l’anatomia metafisica del dramma’<sup>18</sup>. His capacity to go beyond the object makes him the modern painter *par excellence*, that is, in Savinio’s words, ‘il mago moderno’. The essence of aesthetic modernity is defined as the capacity to be ‘all’altezza delle esigenze dell’epoca presente’.<sup>19</sup> This statement questions some fundamental aesthetic assumptions belonging to avant-garde theorization. As the underlying idea is that “l’epoca presente” is fundamentally different from the epoch preceding the war, a new modernity has to be created so as to be a suitable expression of a new time. In this context, a redefinition of modernity in anti-avant-garde terms implies a revision of the notion of “originality”, which is rejected, as ‘l’originalità nelle questioni artistiche non ha un valore vero’.<sup>20</sup> Originality is seen as an exterior feature of the work of art (the concept of art as an abstraction does not exist, according to Savinio) which affects the form but not the intrinsic nature of the work: the importance attributed to originality by ‘l’arte moderna’<sup>21</sup> is a sign of its vulgarity and its surrender to bourgeois taste. Originality is defined as ‘una specie di galanteria’ (‘si diventa originali per piacere alle donne’), a device created to please ‘la borghesia insaziabile che non ammette di fare oggi colazione con la medesima pietanza di ieri’.<sup>22</sup> Savinio claims :

questi sono i misfatti del liberalismo. Il disordine portato nella società



dall'irruzione del terzo stato ha assegnato all'arte il compito di sollazzare il pubblico. A Parigi [...] si è formato già da qualche anno un grosso malinteso a proposito della stessa *arte moderna*: giacché coloro che la praticavano credettero sicuramente di costituire un'*élite* intellettuale, una specie di regno inaccessibile al popolo e al volgo. [...] Ora tutto questo movimento d'estetismo moderno rinchiude i germi della più grassa volgarità...<sup>23</sup>

The issue of originality is treated here polemically, as it assumes an anti-futurist (and anti-cubist) connotation. The only value attributed to the avant-garde is to have destroyed any bourgeois residue in art. To a certain extent, although rejecting the avant-garde project, the *Valori Plastici* group appropriates what Peter Bürger calls the avant-gardist critique of the 'disjunction of art and the praxis of life'<sup>24</sup> in bourgeois society. Such an attitude is made evident by some of Savinio's statements :

Noi consideriamo l'arte come una questione fra le più importanti. Dal nostro punto di vista è anzi la *più importante*. Ben più di una coesione politica, dovrebbe imporne e regolarne la vita, una vera e propria dittatura. [...]

E' l'ora di escludere dalla questione *arte* la questione *diletto*, così com'è l'ora, al contrario, che la questione *arte* si liberi ormai dai ristretti limiti della sua torre d'avorio e di bestialità, e penetri entro ogni dominio sociale : politica, finanza, esercito, clero, ecc.<sup>25</sup>

According to Savinio, therefore, art should be an all-pervasive system. In this sense, although strongly criticizing the avant-garde, it could be said that the *Valori Plastici* group inherits some elements of the avant-gardist legacy.<sup>26</sup> In addition, the anti-bourgeois stance of the periodical indicates a continuity with the avant-gardist rejection of bourgeois culture. Paolo Fossati notices that the return to tradition constitutes for the *Valori Plastici* artists 'la via d'uscita verso un possibile, verso una "plastica tragica" che si contrappone all'arte come "senso decorativo".<sup>27</sup> An art devoid of meaning and devoted to decoration is associated with a bourgeois concept

of art : the retrieval of tradition in terms of the trans-historicity of the concept of *classicità* is seen as the possibility of presenting a version of modernity which will oppose on the one hand the vacuous notion of modernity as constant originality required by the taste of the bourgeoisie, and on the other the version of modernity established before the war by the futurist avant-garde. The definition of “classical” is associated with a notion of art as instrument both of knowledge and the “creation” of reality and is therefore used to contrast an aesthetics of pure realism or decorativeness. As Italo Tivolato argues, ‘l’arte [...] è imitazione della natura, non già imitazione della natura naturata, delle cose di natura, bensì della natura naturante, delle potenze generatrici della natura’.<sup>28</sup>

As far as the idea of *classicità* is concerned within the *Valori Plastici* group, Fossati points out that the classical model is not interpreted in absolute terms, but rather as a relative concept, encompassing individual emotionality in the context of historically precise needs and emotions, with no rigid links with any normative concept of art. He observes that

con il ritorno all’ordine, negli anni [...] fra il 1918 e il 1922, si tende ad affermare una priorità della riflessione critica e della normatività di poetica rispetto a una effettiva costruzione classica o classicistica dei linguaggi e delle opere. In questo modo si assiste a un irrigidimento della teoria, riportata a un modello classico, in qualche modo, e un fluttuare assai composito della pratica pittorica.<sup>29</sup>

Carlo Carrà is a significant example of the rather wide scope that such a notion of *classicità* presents, as he extends the concept to include Giotto and Masaccio’s “primitiveness” as containing the potential for new developments.<sup>30</sup> Some of the complexities and facets that the redefinition of the idea of *classicità* imply within the main theoreticians of the *Valori Plastici* group -namely Carrà, De

Chirico and Savinio- is illustrated by Elena Pontiggia's distinction between *moderna classicità* -a position attributed mainly to Carrà- and *nuovo classicismo* (as distinct from neo-classicism) defining De Chirico's stance on the issue of the return to tradition.<sup>31</sup>

As far as Carrà is concerned, the concept of a modern *classicità* as the attempt to go beyond the artistic achievements of the avant-garde while retaining part of its experience and to conceive of tradition as a legacy to be constantly renewed, is clearly exemplified in the series of articles published in *Valori Plastici*. In a letter to Soffici, written in 1921 he states :

io intendo la "tradizione" come un ritorno ai veri principi dell'arte. Ma questi principi non vanno intesi come canoni fissi, sibbene come forza spirituale in continuo accordo coi tempi [...] Ad ogni modo non si tratta di "ritorno" nel senso meccanico che l'accademia dà a questa parola.<sup>32</sup>

The return to tradition is therefore not to be interpreted in normative terms, but as the recovery of a guiding "spiritual" principle which should have the function both of linking the artist with his time and of establishing a connection with the artists that preceded him. The importance attributed to the necessity of defining such a principle is clearly expressed by Carrà in the article entitled *L' "Italianismo artistico"*, published in the April-May issue of *Valori Plastici*<sup>33</sup>, where he attempts to define the essence of artistic *italianismo*. Carrà maintains that the recovery of such a principle, that is the identification of the essential character of Italian tradition, should not lead to an "archaeological" attitude ; on the contrary, it should lead to an art rooted in history and allow artists to create again those 'rapporti lineari, tanto essenziali per produrre quel magico incanto ch'era pur familiare ai pittori fino all'avvento dell'Impressionismo.'<sup>34</sup> Although such a relationship with the past has



been destroyed by the contemporary obsession with originality, Carrà maintains that continuity is the only principle that can produce artistic excellence. He claims that those who are afraid of losing their spontaneous artistic sensibility should not devote themselves to art, as art and poetry are ‘cose che presuppongono conoscenza degli sviluppi storici e della legge informativa dell’espressione.’<sup>35</sup> He identifies artistic *italianismo* with what he calls the ‘hedonistic principle’ of Italian art, which can be described as the pursuit of ‘il grande nel semplice e il vero nel naturale,’ a principle totally antipathetic to rhetorical and mannered styles. Such a principle is defined as ‘una legge di coordinazione del reale visivo senza la quale il quadro permane un frammento naturalistico che indarno aspira ad un centro unitario.’<sup>36</sup> In this sense, for instance, Impressionism represents the opposite of *italianismo*. However, it is Carrà’s claim that a “modern” art should have a character of historical awareness as well as being rooted in the national tradition. In this regard he comments :

dire oggi arte a carattere di storicità equivale a riconoscere che l’arte è tutt’altro da quella che fu cinquant’anni or sono col “quadro storico” : essa procede da altri impulsi, vive in altri ambienti, è stretta da altre necessità. Allora si faceva quasi esclusivamente questione di “soggetto” ; oggi si riconosce che l’eccellenza di un’opera non risiede nella bella elaborazione, per quanto sia questa una necessità conseguente, ma bensì nella esclusione d’ogni superfluo e nella intrinseca densità uguale in ogni sua parte ; la qual cosa significa unire l’estremo della semplicità al massimo della magnificenza. Nè agli intenti mancheranno i fatti se il pittore terrà conto dello spirito dei tempi, dando a ogni predecessore quello che gli si deve con schiettezza e purità...<sup>37</sup>

The definition of the classical in terms of the harmonious coexistence of simplicity and magnificence is therefore associated by Carrà with what should be the essence of a contemporary aesthetics. However, according to him none of the main national contemporary artistic trends can fulfil the expectations or the needs of the

time. Such needs and expectations and the means whereby contemporary art should fulfil them are analysed in the series of articles entitled *Rinnovamento della pittura in Italia*, (four articles published between December 1919 and June 1920), where Carrà presents the element of *classicità* as specifically congenial to Italian art and stresses that precisely because of it being almost rooted in the Italian climate and in what composes the essence of the Italian people, a return to a tradition intended as a recovery of a classical frame of mind cannot be interpreted in academic or archaeological terms as a retrieval of dead forms. On the contrary, the return to the classical should represent the recovery of the national artistic identity which has been lost in the pursuit of a modernity coming from the North, a modernity which is considered as fundamentally alien to the Italian “spirit” (Carrà defines the art coming from the North as ‘un’arte alchimista, analitica, verista e romantica, che [...] male s’accorda col nostro pensiero, il quale aspira visibilmente ad una forma d’arte sintetica, riposata e tranquilla’<sup>38</sup>). Carrà’s concept of *classicità* is therefore used to describe what, as a matter of fact, he considers as the Italian version of artistic modernity, a modernity that has its roots in the national tradition, which he constantly opposes both to North-European culture and academicism. He claims that it is necessary to re-establish ‘le giuste separazioni fra i principi nostri di tradizione e quelli tradizionali e accademici’<sup>39</sup> and that ‘noi per primi volemmo che l’arte modernissima riprendesse la via della serietà [...] ma, appunto perché animati da questo desiderio vivissimo, non possiamo metterci nel coro scomposto dei nuovi coltivatori d’erba trastulla’.<sup>40</sup> Part of Carrà’s polemical attitude is also his reading of Antonio Canova<sup>41</sup>, an artist rediscovered precisely because he represents one of the main trends of European academicism and because he reminded artists, after the disorder and disruption created by the Baroque, that art is ‘disciplina, serenità e

compostezza'. Carrà explains that the aim of his study of Canova is also to explore the historical context in which neo-classicism flourished, so as to develop a critical method based on the evaluation of historical circumstances rather than on an "absolute" concept of art, and to link artistic activity to the philosophy and politics of a specific period.

De Chirico's version of classicism differs, to a certain extent, from that of Carrà. Pontiggia calls De Chirico's attitude towards *classicità* "new classicism" -as distinct from Carrà's "moderna classicità"- and defines it as placing more emphasis on the eternity of the laws of art rather than on the necessity of modernising them. Therefore, rather than using the concept of classical in national (or nationalist) terms and defining modernity through the notion of *classicità*, he concentrates on creating a link with tradition by claiming the necessity of retrieving a notion of art as *mestiere*. In his article *Il ritorno al mestiere*, published in December 1919, he stresses the importance of going back to basic technical practices, such as long training in drawing and copying and attention to the instruments: 'tele, colori, pennelli, olii, vernici dovranno essere scelti tra quelli di migliore qualità.'<sup>42</sup> The target of De Chirico's critique is the avant-garde, as it has caused the neglect of technique:

Ingres, quando dipingeva, aveva a portata di mano più di cento pennelli di prima qualità, perfettamente lavati e asciutti, pronti a esser impiegati appena l'artista ne avesse bisogno: oggi i nostri avanguardisti si vantano di dipingere con due pennellacci da decoratori, assecchiti, duri, e che nessuno ha mai lavato.<sup>43</sup>

Avant-garde art -and futurist art in particular- is attacked. According to De Chirico it did not even have the function of liberating art from academicism and 'marcio vecchiume'. In fact, he claims, Futurism has been as necessary to Italy as has



been the war:

è venuto come la guerra perché era destino che venisse, ma ne avremmo benissimo potuto fare a meno. Altro che guerra abbisognava all'umanità! E, all'arte, altro che futurismo! [...]

Il futurismo [...] è una sorta di dannunzianesimo imbrogliato di cui contiene le stesse deficienze e falsità ; cioè : mancanza di profondità, nessun senso di umanità, mancanza di costruzione, ermafroditismo di sentimenti, plasticità pederastica, falsa interpretazione della storia, falso lirismo.

In fatto di materia e di mestiere, il futurismo ha dato alla pittura italiana il colpo di grazia. [...]

La politica insegna. Gli isterismi e le cialtronerie sono condannati alle urne. Credo che ormai tutti siano sazi di cialtronerie, sia politiche, letterarie o pittoriche.<sup>44</sup>

The attack on Futurism is not only conducted on the aesthetic level. The “hysteria” represented in the artistic field by the futurist movement is also politically identifiable: such hysteria and “cialtroneria” should no longer be tolerated in either politics or art ; the idea of classical therefore acquires a value that goes beyond the immediacy of aesthetic association. The concept of *classicità* is equated to an order which is not only conceived of as artistic but also as political. Paolo Fossati suggests that the elections to which De Chirico alludes are the November 1919 elections ‘che han segnato la sconfitta del fascismo diciannovista, pseudosocialista e legato alla visione della guerra appena finita, cioè legato alle “isterie” contro cui De Chirico si batte.’<sup>45</sup>

Although De Chirico’s fierce critique of the avant-garde, his claim to be classical, and his insistence on the necessity of returning to technique and craft are not expressly associated with a quest for a new modernity, he nonetheless presents himself as “modern” and as constituting an alternative to avant-garde modernity. In his article *Sull'arte metafisica*<sup>46</sup> he claims that ‘nella costruzione delle città, nella

forma architettuale delle case, delle piazze, dei giardini e dei passeggi pubblici, dei porti, delle stazioni ferroviarie, ecc., stanno le fondamenta di una grande estetica metafisica.' Metaphysical aesthetics therefore acknowledges and uses urbanization and technological modernity. However, the use and interpretation of urban spaces is linked to the recovery of what De Chirico calls 'senso architettonico', that is the framing of pictorial space within an architectural structure, which was constantly present in ancient painting -from Greek painting to artists such as Giotto and Perugino to Poussin and Lorrain- and has been forgotten by modern painters. Such "architectural sense" is complementary to a "metaphysical" conception of art, as -De Chirico argues- architecture "completes" nature : 'il paesaggio, chiuso nell'arcata del portico, come nel quadrato o nel rettangolo della finestra, acquista maggior valore metafisico, poiché si solidifica e viene isolato dallo spazio che lo circonda.'<sup>47</sup> The notion of architecture completing nature is significant, as it establishes a direct link between the art of the past and that of the present, between antiquity and modernity ; it reinforces the notion of a "mediated" realism, as the architectural framing adds a "metaphysical" element to the painting ; it restores the 'senso della costruzione' that had been lost with avant-garde art; and, finally, it gives the subject matter that "order" which is the essence of classical art:

le prospettive delle costruzioni s'innalzano piene di mistero e di presentimenti [...] e l'opera d'arte [...] è tutto il dramma cosmico e vitale che avvolge gli uomini e li costringe entro le sue spirali, ove passato e futuro si confondono, ove gli enigmi dell'esistenza, santificati dal soffio dell'arte svestono l'aspetto ingrovigliato e pauroso che fuori dell'arte l'uomo s'immagina, per rivestire l'apparenza eterna, tranquilla e consolante, della costruzione geniale.<sup>48</sup>

The contributions of the third major theoretician within the group, Alberto

Savinio, seem to concentrate less on formal aspects and more on theoretical issues. He focuses on the definition of *classicità* as related to a “metaphysical” concept of art. In his article “*Anadioménon*”. *Principi di valutazione dell’arte contemporanea*, published in the April-May 1919 issue, he defines the term ‘metafisico’ as no longer referring to ‘un ipotetico dopo-naturale’, but as meaning ‘tutto ciò che della realtà continua l’essere, oltre gli aspetti grossolanamente patenti della *realtà* medesima.’<sup>49</sup>

Savinio claims that

ogni inquietudine s’avvia fatalmente a una calma in cui quella sostanza scissa che provocò l’urto inquietante si spiana e si distende in tutta la sua verità : è il processo naturale che conduce dal barbarismo al classico. Questa premessa riassume la psicologia di un periodo artistico, dai suoi primordi alla sua conclusione.<sup>50</sup>

*Classicità* represents for Savinio the final and most accomplished stage of an artistic period. Metaphysical art, therefore, is seen as “classical”, that is as the final stage of an artistic process started by Cézanne, against both the ‘animal sensualism’ of the impressionists and the geometrical one-sidedness of the cubists. Such a transformation, although started in France, could not achieve a finished result in that country, as it was of a “spiritual” nature, and France is ‘preclusa alla spiritualità’ : ‘si analizzi l’intera arte francese’ -Savinio argues- ‘e si vedrà che essa sempre e sempre rimane irrimediabilmente naturalistica.’<sup>51</sup> The movement of the renewal of art, started by Cézanne and continued by Gauguin, has reached the stage of accomplishment with the work of Giorgio De Chirico and Carlo Carrà. The main features of these painters’ art -and consequently the main elements of *classicità* in metaphysical painting- are, in Savinio’s words, ‘pienezza di rappresentazione della necessità spirituale nei suoi limiti plastici, potenzialità espressiva della spettralità degli aspetti,



ironia.’<sup>52</sup> The first feature is described as the definitive form achieved by art when reaching its classical stage ; ‘spettralità’ is defined as the true, substantial essence of reality. The character of ‘spettralità’ in art is commonly destroyed by banality, that is the disappearance -through lack of insight- of the truth contained in the appearance of reality and the obfuscation of its exact perception. Perception is also at the centre of the notion of artistic irony, which is claimed to have an important part in painting, as irony can only be achieved when the artist reaches the moment of greatest clarity of perception. In that moment the artist

percepisce nettamente allora la precisione originale della Natura, la quale precisione, riflessa nell’uomo e, pel tramite di questo destinata ad esternarsi in una ulteriore rappresentazione, produce una reazione sottilissima [...] che si può chiamare pudore. E’ questa ragione che induce l’artista, sè malgrado, a deformare in qualche modo, nel riprodurli, gli aspetti terribilmente chiari che egli percepisce.<sup>53</sup>

The swerve, the movement of escape in relation to reality caused by the artist’s extreme lucidity of perception and consequent attitude of “modesty” -as Savinio puts it- which is at the basis of irony, is not, therefore, a movement “away” from reality, but rather an almost paradoxical affirmation of such clarity of perception. Savinio is possibly referring here to De Chirico’s painting. Irony is considered as an essential component of metaphysical art, as it is the metaphysical element *par excellence*, being the means through which the artist’s superiority of perception is expressed.<sup>54</sup>

The achievement of a classical phase in art coincides for Savinio with a moment of historic and consequently artistic (indeed, he argues that as spiritual movements are an inevitable consequence of political facts, the two are practically indissoluble) palingenesis whose cause was the war. For this reason the war is defined by Savinio as ‘una fatalità felice’. Such a definition appears in the article

entitled *Fini dell'Arte*<sup>55</sup>, which is partially conceived of as a continuation of the previous article *Anadioménon* and in which Savinio analyses the aims of the art in the new epoch started with the war. The new era should be characterized by a regained primacy of Italy over the other European countries. In this respect Savinio claims: ‘noi, da ora, consideriamo nell'Italia una nazione che ritorna ai suoi destini massimi: lascia la fase dell'appartamento, delle ridotte possibilità, di quello che comunemente si chiamò *provincialismo*, e trova il senso pieno della sua posizione capitale.’<sup>56</sup> Savinio's discourse is rather ambiguous throughout the article: after making clear, in fact, that politics and culture (or, to be more precise, what he calls “spiritual facts”) are inextricable, he seems to proceed to talk about art; however a subtle political undertone seems to be present in the text alongside the artistic commentary. It is precisely this undertone of artistic nationalism that distinguishes Savinio's writings from those of De Chirico, as the latter does not seem to place particular emphasis on the notion of “classical” as exclusively “Italian”.<sup>57</sup>

The renewal of art should, according to Savinio, carry ‘il nuovo segno della nostra verità di razza’, as Italy -he argues- as distinct from the stability reached by other countries, finds itself in a constant situation of ‘fecondo divenire’, of continual revolution and change. Such a situation is caused by geographical features (he mentions Italy's seismicity) as well as historical conditions. According to Savinio all this constant revolution leads to a continuous situation of “genesis” which constitutes evidence of the fact that ‘più di ogni altro popolo, tendiamo alla regione classica.’ He then continues: ‘questo pensiero deve sovrastare gli altri nostri; guidarci; scioglierci dalle basse preoccupazioni della materia; farci mirare ai fini massimi dell'arte.’<sup>58</sup> The renewal of art coincides with a rebirth of Italy. Such a rebirth in turn coincides with the end of what Savinio calls “the French period”. As in his previous article, he

insists on the inadequacy of the French character for leading a revolution towards the classical, as

I francesi non sono capaci di far altro: la loro natura è più animale che spirituale; ogni forma della loro produzione artistica, letteraria, poetica, risponde più che altro, a certe causistiche necessità sensuali. Essi poggiano sulla materia: ma la materia è corruttibile e caduca; e pertanto i francesi, subito dopo alcune rifiorite, ripiombano nel decadentismo più disciolto; e, perciò, l'arte francese, all'indomani di Rimbaud e di Cézanne, si lascia infettare dal *dadaismo*!<sup>59</sup>

Italy has therefore now the task of leading art to a new classical phase. However, for Savinio *classicità*, interpreted as the final stage of a process -both in terms of art and civilisation- is not a prescriptive concept, a set of rules or the return to a past epoch, but, since it is conceived of as a trans-historical category, it becomes a form of modernity:

classicismo [...] non è ritorno a forme antecedenti, prestabilite e consacrate da una epoca trascorsa: ma è raggiungimento della forma più adatta alla realizzazione di un pensiero e di una volontà artistica - la quale non esclude affatto le novità di espressione, anzi le include, anzi le esige.<sup>60</sup>

Fossati defines Savinio's *classicità* as 'stimolo e non modulo, [...] esempio e non legge' ; his sense of "rebirth" implies the notion of an artistic "renaissance" of which the new *classicità* he theorises should be the expression.<sup>61</sup>

Of crucial importance for the understanding of the discourse carried out by the intellectuals gathered around *Valori Plastici* is the debate on the Italian *Seicento* - published in the periodical in 1921<sup>62</sup>- started by an article by De Chirico, entitled *La Mania del Seicento*, where he strongly criticizes the excessive interest on the part of



art critics in the art of the seventeenth century and the plethora of acolytes that such an interest has produced. De Chirico's critique focuses on the confusion that the recent interest in the *Seicento* creates in terms of the notion of 'return to tradition' which characterizes post-war artistic discourse. In fact, what he and the *Valori Plastici* group promote is a redefinition of an artistic tradition from the point of view of what they regard as the idea of *italianità*. In this sense, they construct the notion of "italianness" around their concept of *classicità* by presenting this concept as representing the true Italian spirit manifesting itself throughout the ages. The art of the *Seicento*, far from being -as some critics would have it- 'il pernio della tradizione pittorica italiana', expresses a corruption and a decadence of that spirit which are fundamentally due to foreign influences, and, therefore, cannot be included in the reconstruction of what should constitute the Italian traditional canon. In particular, the *Seicento* is seen by De Chirico as the starting point of the decadence of contemporary painting, as in this century both the technical aspect and the "spiritual" content of the work of art are neglected in favour of the facile use of inherited techniques and the portrayal of reality 'così come [il pittore] la vede'. In seventeenth century painting everything is turned, according to De Chirico, into "still life", and this represents the beginning of "verismo". Such lack of interest in the possibilities offered by both techniques of representation and exploration of content is attributed to the increasing penetration of the bourgeois mentality in the realm of art. It is in the seventeenth century, in fact, that art starts reflecting 'quel senso borghese banale e imbellè che ancora sopravvive, degenerato fino all'inverosimile, in tutti i pittori esteri e nostrani che vanno per la maggiore'<sup>63</sup>, which is often of Flemish origin -especially in the reproduction of interiors- and which is even found in some of Caravaggio's work.<sup>64</sup>

The concept of “Italian spirit”, presented as a counterpart to the North-European bourgeois “spirit” represented by the *Seicento* is described as fundamentally rooted in those De Chirico calls the ‘ragioni fatali di configurazione geografica, di clima, di storia, di aspetto fisico e metafisico della nostra penisola.’<sup>65</sup>

Such a spirit is defined as

spirito di viaggiatore e di nauta scopritore di mondi nuovi, [...] uno spirito italiano triste, anche nella sua gioia, e più profondo nella sua gioia che nella sua tristezza; [...] una natura italiana classica, ariosa e avventurosa [...] lo ritroviamo questo spirito [...] nell’opera di un Beato Angelico, d’un Carpaccio, d’un Signorelli, d’un Botticelli, d’un Piero della Francesca, ma non ne ritroviamo nemmeno l’ombra in tutta la pittura del Seicento.<sup>66</sup>

The *Quattrocento* is therefore the period in which the “Italian spirit” as a fundamentally “classical” spirit is encapsulated. The *Quattrocento* is, in fact, characterized by ‘una pittura chiara e solida in cui figura e cose appaiono come lavate e purificate e risplendenti d’una luce interna. Fenomeno di bellezza metafisica che ha qualcosa di primaverile e di autunnale nel tempo stesso.’<sup>67</sup> This description of fifteenth century painting evokes the definition of *classicità* developed by the *Valori Plastici* group, whereas the art of the seventeenth century is interpreted as fundamentally “anti-classical” and is regarded as bearing the seeds of artistic decadence.

What emerges from the response to De Chirico’s critique is significant in terms of a series of positions and attitudes towards the *Seicento* which will be important in the following years in literary, artistic and cultural theorization.

Carrà’s position within the debate is more moderate and, to a certain extent, more inclined to critical analysis : for instance he does not consider Caravaggio’s so

called *tenebrismo* (that is the use of dark backgrounds for his paintings), ‘un giuochetto’, ‘un trucco’ or an evident lack of technique, as De Chirico defines it ; he rather sees it as

un tono di appoggio di grande rilievo pittorico, non perché isoli le figure e gli oggetti, bensì perché li spazia in una gamma di neutralità il cui rapporto metafisico non è sempre afferrabile dall’osservatore. Mercé questa “irrealtà” il pittore poteva a suo agio sguinzagliare la sua ardente sensibilità plastica.<sup>68</sup>

Carrà maintains that it is important, from the point of view of critical reception and analysis, to draw the public’s attention to seventeenth century Italian painting, especially because in Italy ‘alligna una razza di critici così parruccona ed ottusa da credere ancora che l’arte italiana sia morta con la morte di Raffaello.’<sup>69</sup> However, Carrà continues, although a fair critical evaluation of *Seicento* and *settecento* painting is needed, such a recovery should not have a prescriptive value, but only a cultural and historical function; the contemporary epoch does not need to be diverted to the ‘bravure sensualistiche della pittura secentesca e settecentesca’ and its ‘abilità e virtuosità formali’, as they caused the loss of contact with ‘le ragioni della spiritualità’.<sup>70</sup> What needs to be recovered and transmitted to artists is the capacity to express spiritual purity, which can only be found in what are considered the origins of Italian and Mediterranean painting, that is Giotto, Piero della Francesca and Simone Martini.<sup>71</sup>

According to Emilio Cecchi’s short contribution to the debate the so-called *mania del Seicento* is probably simply a transitory fashion and as such insubstantial. However, when it is used as an exemplary period against academicism, or -even worse- to invoke a return to “reality”, then it can be dangerous, as academicism



might once again be replaced by *verismo*. Cecchi maintains that ‘fintanto che si propongono escursioni ed emigrazioni culturali è segno che non si è nemmeno lontanamente consumato il debito, e si potrebbe anche dire la maledizione della coltura.’<sup>72</sup>

Nonetheless, some masters of the *Seicento* continued and developed the Venetian tradition in the reproduction of certain atmospheres and colours. But such art reflects a period of dissolution: the sense of composition belonging to the Italian tradition disintegrates, thereby causing the end of great literature and painting and the beginning of modern *frammentismo*.

The issue of the interpretation of the *Seicento* as *verismo* is central to Cipriano Oppo's contribution to the debate, significantly entitled *Discussioni inutili*. Oppo is concerned to defend Caravaggio from De Chirico's accusation of being a *verista*. Caravaggio indeed cannot be defined only as a *verista* ‘perché egli si costruisce una sua atmosfera speciale mai usata prima e non copia il vero ma compone. [...] Insomma nell'arte del Caravaggio tutto tende a divenire stile e definizione.’<sup>73</sup> Oppo maintains that in the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries the aim of painting was the same as in the seventeenth century, that is as faithful as possible a reproduction of reality. However such reproduction was the result more of a process of observation and memory rather than copying, and the artist's task was to represent reality through a mixture of memory and *maniera*. Subsequently, the influence of Humanism distracted the artist's attention from the portrayal of objective reality and spiritual visions and directed it towards the Greek and Roman representations of ideal beauty. Raphael, Leonardo, Michelangelo and Giorgione represent the culmination of the acquisition of technique, scientific knowledge and absorption of the formal perfection of antiquity. Oppo admits that the seventeenth century can be

seen as the beginning of artistic decadence, as artists are no longer interested in either mysticism or ideal beauty ; however, he disagrees with his contemporaries' insistence on the *Quattrocento*, as it cannot be denied that each epoch -the fifteenth century included- has its masters and its mannerisms. His conclusion is that such discussion are useless and that instead of encouraging such debates artists should fight against rigid critical framing and indeed free themselves from cultural superstructures, so as to be able to genuinely and purely enjoy art. Finally, the great masters should be considered and enjoyed individually, regardless of the school or period to which they belong.

Massimo Bontempelli reads the Italian *Seicento* as a period similar, for its cultural implications, to North-European Romanticism, as it represents the origin of the aesthetic decadence represented by the Italian 'decadimentismo' (D'Annunzio) and avant-garde (Futurism), in the same way as German and French Romanticism are at the origin of the avant-garde in those countries. The *Seicento* is therefore associated by Bontempelli with Romanticism as a synonym for decadence. As the seventeenth century is to be considered the origin of modern decadence, a return to that artistic period in the name of tradition, is, to some extent, a defensive tautological operation : 'ci siamo attaccati appunto a quella tradizione, il cui svolgimento deve riportarci qui, dove siamo già arrivati'<sup>74</sup> is Bontempelli's conclusion to his argument.

A significant contribution to the debate is that by Margherita Sarfatti. By the beginning of the 1920s Sarfatti, after several years as an activist militant in the Italian Socialist Party and as a journalist for such papers as *Avanti!*, *Rassegna femminile* (a feminist-oriented magazine), *Difesa delle lavoratrici*, and *Il popolo d'Italia*, is an influential journalist and art critic, particularly famous for supporting modernist art

(in the pre-war years she had been very close to the futurists). Her intimate friendship with Benito Mussolini, started in 1913, will make her even more influential during the 1920s, both in the artistic and political field, to such an extent that she will be called “the dictator of the figurative arts”.<sup>75</sup>

Sarfatti's position in the debate is similar to that of De Chirico and Bontempelli: the *Seicento* is perceived as the expression of an anti-classical, romantic spirit which is considered as the opposite of “italianness”. Sarfatti, whose critical approach is mainly psychological and often imbued with moral tones, associates what she calls ‘romantic essence’ with heresy, protestantism and ‘tutte le forme di grido, di ribellione, di non accettazione parossistica.’<sup>76</sup> This spiritual attitude is so antipathetic to the Italian spirit that none of its expressions can be long-lived in Italy and are soon extinguished. Such was the art of the *Seicento*, the interest in which Sarfatti identifies with the necessity of recovering technique and craft after the romantic emphasis on pathos. However seventeenth century art represents ‘il virtuosismo della tecnica, invece della sua virtù.’ In Sarfatti's contribution the evaluation of the seventeenth century gradually shifts from the artistic to the moral field and the century is described as ‘un'epoca di scarsa probità, di scarso coraggio, di scarsa dignità morale: Spagna, tiranni, gesuiti e arcadia.’<sup>77</sup> Seventeenth century art necessarily reflects such moral decadence and is described as unreal and sumptuous, fundamentally more interested in appearance than in substance. The following neoclassical period is therefore read by Sarfatti as the restoration of ‘pudore morale’, which is one of the fundamental aspects of *classicità*.<sup>78</sup>

Similar to these positions, although richer in terms of cultural and political implications, is that of Curt Suckert. He takes the argument further, going beyond the mere artistic evaluation of the seventeenth century and recognizing in that period a



more general phenomenon of ‘decomposizione del mondo classico’<sup>79</sup>. In particular, the origins of the “spirit” of the *Seicento* are identified by Suckert in the “northern” spirit of the Reformation, described as ‘metafisico’<sup>80</sup> as opposed to the catholic and mediterranean ‘spirito plastico’. The spread of the spirit of the Reformation from northern to southern Europe is to be identified as the cause of a fundamental cultural revolution, as

la Riforma, oltre ad avere spostato il centro della civiltà da mezzogiorno a settentrione e da oriente a occidente, mutando così lo spirito italiano da europeo, cioè da quel ch’era stato fino ad allora, in quel ch’è tuttora, cioè in spirito regionale, ha prodotto un vero rovesciamento dei valori morali ed estetici, soprattutto con l’obbligare l’attività speculativa del secolo a cercar nuovi rapporti fra gli uomini e le cose e nuove dipendenze fra il mondo fisico e quello metafisico.<sup>81</sup>

From the point of view of art, the most significant example of the disruption and spiritual restlessness caused by such transformations is epitomised by Michelangelo. The artist is in fact defined as the incarnation of this Italian spirit, as he represents the “Italian man” *par excellence*, that is, in Suckert’s words, a man

realista e pratico, metà sangue e metà terra, pianta fino alla cintola e animale dalla cintola in su, una specie di centauro dei tre regni della natura, essere concreto che pensa come agisce, ricco di fantasia fisica, povero di sogni, talvolta umano fino alla bestialità, spesso idealista fino alla pazzia, che Spinoza avrebbe chiamato l’eroe della “natura naturata”<sup>82</sup>

Michelangelo, however, already shows the signs of a “metaphysical anxiety”, of a tension between matter and spirit, which make him belong to a phase of transition between the classical and the modern world. However, as Michelangelo epitomises what Suckert calls the ‘spirito plastico’ which belongs to the classical - and Italian- world (and for this reason, he claims Michelangelo is ‘negato a innestare

sull'antichissimo seno plastico della razza quelle inquietudini metafisiche che agitavano lo spirito dei popoli settentrionali'<sup>83</sup>), such tension is expressed through the exaggeration and exasperation of his innate plasticity. In this sense Michelangelo represents 'l'ultima persona dell'antico dramma dello spirito italiano, e la prima di quello moderno.'<sup>84</sup> Suckert observes that Michelangelo's art was still the art of 'Roma cattolica' ; however Rome had already lost its power and the tragedy of the *Seicento* became the tragedy 'della nostra razza e di tutto lo spirito latino.' Consequently, the art of the *Seicento* is to be interpreted as

il prodotto di una decomposizione delle forme classiche tradizionali, di una deformazione, quasi [...] d'un inquinamento dell'antichissimo e particolare senso plastico proprio della razza mediterranea, dovuto senza dubbio allo squilibrio che l'inquietudine metafisica dei filosofi settentrionali e gli avvenimenti politici e religiosi degli ultimi cento anni avevano determinato negli uomini di quel secolo.<sup>85</sup>

In this context, therefore, *classicità* -as an expression of the Latin spirit- is opposed to modernity as the expression of the decadence of classical civilization caused by the penetration of north-European culture. The predominance of modernity over the classical spirit represents the invasion of northern culture, brought to prominence by the Reformation, over the prevalence of the Latin, southern, ultimately Italian spirit. The acknowledgement of the *Seicento* as an important part of Italian tradition would therefore imply the denial of the catholic, mediterranean, spirit, in other words of the particular character of *italianità* of the classical tradition, in favour of a "non-italian" modernity.

However, the *mania del Seicento* is not only an artistic phenomenon. Suckert indeed identifies a political *seicentismo*, initially personified by such individuals as D'Annunzio and Papini and intellectual groups such as those of *La Voce* and

*Lacerba* and now more generally extended to Italian public taste. Such a form of *seicentismo*, defined as ‘gonfiore e retorica’, when practised by these intellectuals was harmless, as it mainly represented personal aspirations. But as such aspirations - together with the rhetoric that followed it- have now been made accessible to the Italian public, they require closer attention and a deeper analysis. In particular, Suckert observes that a taste for ‘retorica e gonfiore’ in art goes hand in hand with the same taste in politics, and that the current situation is comparable to that of the *Seicento*. His comment in this respect is that ‘ogni volta che lo spirito italiano, come fa ora, tenterà di risollevarsi, si ritroverà nel medesimo rapporto, ch’ebbe già nel Seicento, con lo spirito europeo, e che perciò l’identica situazione determinerà identici aspetti.’<sup>86</sup> However, he concludes, despite the similarities, the comparison between the *Seicento* and twentieth century Italy creates an overall sense of uneasiness, as the present situation is so distant from the ‘magnifico delirio’ represented by seventeenth century culture, that it would never be able to imitate it.

The opposition between the culture of the *Quattrocento* -as the most accomplished expression of the Italian civilisation- and that of the *Seicento* -as the beginning of a decadence related to the intrusion in Italian culture of elements of North-European origin- which emerges from the most controversial contributions to the debate, outlines a dichotomy in the interpretation of the evolution of European culture, which will be further developed by political and aesthetic theorization throughout the 1920s. The combination of political and aesthetic elements in the evaluation of the *Seicento* is certainly one of the most important features in the debate. Besides, such a combination sheds light on the role played by the relationship between Italian and European culture in *Valori Plastici*’s redefinition of tradition and quest for *classicità*, thereby providing a useful key to the understanding of the



periodical's project. Paolo Fossati's comment on the issue of the relationship between *Valori Plastici* and Europe within the scope of the periodical's recovery and redefinition of the Italian tradition can offer an effective conclusive summary :

Una strana immagine d'Europa vien fuori dai fascicoli di *Valori Plastici*, oscillante fra presenza e assenza, fra rifiuto e continuo richiamo: presente a motivare un giudizio negativo su di sé, a rimandare irresistibilmente entro i confini nazionali.[...]

Il rapporto con l'Europa va rovesciato nel senso non che ciò che viene fuori è modello per gli italiani, ma è l'Italia che ritrova se stessa, che modernamente rientra nella propria tradizione a divenire esempio per gli altri, offrendosi in continuità con i propri grandi esempi storici, da cui sempre l'Europa ha dovuto attingere. E' l'Italia della tradizione la vera Europa...<sup>87</sup>

**La Ronda and the ambiguities of modern classicità**

*L'Italia sta per divenire un paese moderno, ecco  
la sconfinata promessa che si offre al nostro avvenire artistico e spirituale.*  
(Vincenzo Cardarelli)

*nessuno è meno neoclassicista di noi*  
(La Ronda)

In his introduction to an anthology of *La Ronda*, Giuseppe Cassieri summarizes with these words what he calls 'il demone' of the famous periodical<sup>88</sup> :

Qualcuno ha definito quel periodico un mirabile muro a secco. Immagine forse non lusinghiera, ma quanto mai attinente. Mentre per tutte le altre riviste del quarantennio l'aspirazione più o meno manifesta era di dar vita a un moto spirituale, a un rivolgimento, a un tentativo di ideologia, di metodo, rifondendo di volta in volta le scorie che vi si accumulavano, per la *Ronda* le preoccupazioni furono squisitamente particolaristiche. Non puntavano all'edificio, ma alla pietra, al bugnato, convinti che bastasse lavorare sul materiale di cantiere perché l'intero venisse su con i crismi della potenza e della resistenza. La parola, dunque. Ma non come delirio di veggenti, bensì discorsiva manifestazione di una civiltà, di un civismo da professare.<sup>89</sup>

With regard to *La Ronda*'s ideological collocation, Lia Fava Guzzetta notices that the *rondisti*, as a result of the war,

esclusa la scelta del Serra che nella guerra scopriva un non senso della figura stessa del letterato e una messa in crisi totale dell'idea dell'impegno assoluto [...] ed esclusa d'altronde la ripresa di un qualunque mito di *rinnovamento*<sup>90</sup> [...] si ritrovano per un verso a voler demistificare la figura del combattente e per l'altro a temere proprio la ripresa di una qualunque idea di un impegno da rinnovare.<sup>91</sup>

As far as the political position of *La Ronda* is concerned, Luisa Mangoni points out the extent to which the critical tradition up to the 1970s has always interpreted the periodical only in literary terms, as if the fact that its artistic

programme did not have a correspondent political agenda implied that the political positions of its contributors should not be taken into account when examining the periodical. The scholar observes that the artistic position of the periodical can in fact be interpreted in political terms. In particular, she notices that

*La Ronda* non formulò ipotesi di organizzazione culturale al fine della formazione di una classe dirigente: in questo senso lo stato era qualcosa di lontano, non in quanto di esso non si dovesse parlare, ma in quanto su di esso non si poteva e doveva intervenire. Da un lato la politica, dall'altro la cultura, nell'accezione, molto restrittiva, artistico-letteraria: si poteva e si doveva naturalmente auspicare che a questa letteratura vista come tradizione italiana, gerarchia di valori, ordine, corrispondesse un'organizzazione statuale fondata sugli stessi principi.<sup>92</sup>

However, the *rondisti* renounce any quest for political engagement, in favour of a pursuit of tradition as a form of “reconstruction”: the ‘interiore coscienza e dignità di nazione’, mentioned by Lorenzo Montano’s character *Medardo*<sup>93</sup>, which Italy did not possess and which they had hoped to claim with the war, had not been achieved, and in this sense the war had been lost. In this context, the task left to the *letterato* seems to ‘ricostruire, con un un lavoro paziente, senza attendersi troppo da esso, un legame collettivo, nel senso di un patrimonio di tutti, di una tradizione appunto.’<sup>94</sup>

*La Ronda*’s programme is stated by Vincenzo Cardarelli in the first issue of the periodical, with a *Prologo in Tre Parti*, where he explains the founding of the periodical as justified by *consanguineità* and *consuetudine*:

L’uscita di questa rivista trova la sua giustificazione nella consanguineità degli elementi che la compongono. Quasi tutti gli scrittori che vi collaboreranno regolarmente si conoscono da lungo tempo, e sono cresciuti, si può dire, insieme amici di gioventù, se non d’infanzia. Una spontanea affinità di gusti, di coltura, di educazione doveva condurli naturalmente ad accogliersi intorno a questa pubblicazione che essi promettono di curare, senza strepito e senza illusioni.<sup>95</sup>



Such an introduction can be considered as a sort of “anti-manifesto”: a group of men of letters found a periodical which has no theoretical or political programme, but whose existence is based exclusively on a shared literary taste. The cult of the “word” stressed by Cassieri is, however, part of a more complex problematic involving the construction of a “new” modernity based on the return to a specific literary tradition, a redefinition of the notion of classicism in terms of style, and the acknowledgement of “diletto” -that is the detachment of art from any social or political activity- as the only function of art. *La Ronda*’s programme is based on the attempt to create a new notion of literary modernity to be opposed to the versions of modernity imposed on literature -in the pre-war period- by the *vocianti* and, to use Caretti’s words ‘[i] dannunziani di piccolo cabotaggio, sontuosi e incontinenti ; e [...] [i] futuristi, le loro fumisterie e la loro irrazionalità anarcoide.’<sup>96</sup>

The *rondisti* themselves, after a year of activity, summarize with these words the Italian post-war literary situation :

Da un lato si assisteva a quella forma vacua e falsamente superba di degenerazione accademico-estetica che si definisce dannunzianesimo (escludiamo l’opera del D’Annunzio stesso). Dall’altro il pascolismo [...] minacciava un’invasione sorniona e doppiamente pericolosa : per la poesia, con l’equivoco sentimentale e fanciullesco ; per la dignità degli studi filologici, stemprando in lacrime anche l’etimologia. In terzo luogo il futurismo, riallacciandosi da una parte al dannunziano culto dell’energia, dall’altra al frammentarismo e alla labilità linguistica sintattica pascoliana e proclamando il suo pseudo-cosmopolitismo a buon mercato, faceva ancora strage nelle famiglie italiane.<sup>97</sup>

In this context, their aim is to resume the lost contact with what they call ‘la più grande e schietta tradizione italiana’, interrupted after Leopardi and Manzoni, and to reconcile the apparently opposite notions of classicism and modernity, as this is identified as the formula which allowed the nations which dominated the great

epochs of civilisation (Greece and Italy, for instance) to influence the world. Following these models, the version of modernity they propose is based -almost paradoxically<sup>98</sup>- on the return to the notion of “form” handed down by the masters of classical tradition : ‘i nostri maestri furono grandi e meritano qualche rispetto. E’ la bontà e sono gli esempi della loro scuola che ci interessa di far valere’<sup>99</sup> they claim, and they particularly emphasize the importance in the development of their aesthetics of rereading and reinterpreting some fundamental authors of the Italian tradition. In this respect, Charles Burdett stresses the quasi-religious impact attributed by Cardarelli to the rediscovery of Giacomo Leopardi. In particular he quotes a passage from *Le opere e i Giorni* where Cardarelli evokes his encounter with Leopardi’s work:

Questo fu per noi un avvenimento della massima importanza, che [...] ci costrinse mettere il capo a partito. Non soltanto era una voce antica e familiarissima a cui sarebbe stato impossibile disubbidire, ma un santo della tradizione che si staccava dalla sua polverosa nicchia per rivelarsi un autore modernissimo. [...] Da quando abbiamo capito questo siamo rientrati nell’ordine. Il nostro nomadismo è finito.<sup>100</sup>

Burdett outlines how Leopardi is represented almost as a saint, a Christ-like figure returning from the dead to impose his law on the living<sup>101</sup>. However, the religious metaphor is here used not only to stress the author’s enthusiasm in embracing a new artistic faith. The previously untouchable ‘santo della tradizione’ removes himself from his dusty alcove to reveal himself as ‘modernissimo’. The key word ‘modernissimo’ conceals a quest for legitimation: if ‘i santi della tradizione’ are no longer hidden in their recesses, if they can be re-read as “modern”, then a return to tradition is -almost paradoxically- conceivable in the name of modernity, that is an alternative modernity -based on order and *italianità*- whose character is exclusively



defined in terms of style. After all, *La Ronda* opens invoking the return to tradition, not only in the name of the *rondisti*'s 'simpatie per il passato', but also -and above all- as a key to the conquest of modernity :

L'Italia sta per divenire un paese moderno, ecco la stupenda e sconfinata promessa che si offre al nostro avvenire artistico e spirituale. Ritardata la nostra modernità di più di un mezzo secolo [...] e rifatta l'Italia grettamente nazionalistica e provinciale nelle arti, la nostra letteratura intraducibile e poco valida ad attestare della nostra universalità tra le nazioni contemporanee, forse è giunto per noi il momento di uscire e farci intendere in questo contagioso crepuscolo della civiltà moderna europea [...] Dobbiamo farci coraggio e raccogliere questo vago anelito che i più grandi spiriti della modernità hanno mandato verso di noi...<sup>102</sup>

The task the *rondisti* set for themselves is not only to be recipients for the legacy transmitted by 'i più grandi spiriti della modernità', but also to reconstruct the line of tradition in which that legacy can be inscribed. In particular, the fundamental element they consider in their recovery and consequent redefinition of literary tradition is style. As Riccardo Bacchelli states in October 1919 :

Nei tempi andati, le scuole d'arte servivano da laboratorio e da officina, poi d'insegnamento, e finalmente da conservatorio. Conservavano cioè la tradizione. Noi siamo nemicissimi dell'idolatria, e ci occorre spiegarci su questo vocabolo. Tradizione vuol dire conservazione, nell'arte, del senso storico, trasmessa attraverso un rispetto ed una conoscenza, com'è ovvio, di forme. Questa preliminare conoscenza è necessaria se non si vuole restare in quell'ambito di puro gusto e pura preziosità materiale che è il mito dell'arte popolare, o in quell'altro puro gusto e pura materia, che è l'arte disfatta e arbitraria delle estreme decadenze.<sup>103</sup>

The tradition to be considered as such, preserved and continued is therefore a tradition of form, and it is within the notion of form that *La Ronda*'s cultural operation must be framed. Tradition means not only transmission but also knowledge. The cognitive value attributed to the acknowledgement and transmission



of the legacy of tradition is clearly indicated by Cardarelli, when he states that ‘dai classici [...] abbiamo imparato ad essere uomini prima che letterati’<sup>104</sup>. However, those acknowledged as “classics” by the *rondisti* are identified as such on formal grounds, indeed their legacy is precisely a legacy of style: for those whom the *La Ronda* group designates as “the classics”, in fact, ‘l’arte non aveva altro scopo che il diletto’ and it is this concept of *humanitas* that the *rondisti* intend to pursue, against pre-war literary tendencies, defined by the group as ‘letteratura di parvenus che s’illudono di essere bravi scherzando col mestiere e giocano la loro fortuna su dieci termini o modi non consueti’<sup>105</sup>. *La Ronda*’s classicism, on the contrary, is based on the return to the stylistic and rhetorical path shown by the masters of tradition and on the retrieval of what Cardarelli calls a ‘simulacro di castità formale’ -achieved through ‘tutti gli inganni della logica, dell’ironia, del sentimento, ogni sorta d’astuzie’<sup>106</sup>- which fundamentally represents the acknowledgement, rereading and reviving of what is only apparently dead but which constitutes Italian tradition. The use, on Cardarelli’s part, of the word ‘castità’ in relation to form not only implies the choice of stylistic sobriety as opposed to pre-war excesses, but also attributes to form an ethical connotation. The choice of “chastity” as opposed to the previous generation’s “immodesty” is linked to a tradition of formal rigour which is interpreted as constituting, throughout the ages, the core of Italian modernity :

Ci sostiene la sicurezza di avere un modo nostro di leggere e rimettere in vita ciò che sembra morto. Il nostro classicismo è metaforico e a doppio fondo. Seguitare a servirci con fiducia di uno stile defunto non vorrà dire per noi altro che realizzare delle nuove eleganze, perpetuare, insomma, insensibilmente, la tradizione della nostra arte. E questo stimeremo essere moderni alla maniera italiana, senza spatriarci.<sup>107</sup>

The idea of *italianità* is the fundamental concept which allows *La Ronda*’s

intellectuals to present as a quest for modernity what is, in fact, a project of restoration. If on the one hand, the *rondisti* use the legacy of the classics as a means to present a version of modernity as “Italian” to be opposed to the common perception of modernity as an “imported” concept, on the other, the return to the Italian classical tradition as a tradition of “disengaged” art is used to dismiss the whole pre-war avant-garde project of the reconciliation between art and life-praxis. The reappropriation and redefinition of modernity is therefore conducted exclusively according to stylistic criteria, as literature is considered by the *rondisti* ‘strettamente, esclusivamente arte, arte della parola.’<sup>108</sup> ‘Affidandoci alla concretezza di un vocabolo’ Gargiulo claims ‘[...] intendevamo annullare nella sua insospettabile tradizione ogni traccia che in noi fosse di superstite “contenutismo”’.<sup>109</sup> “Content” is dangerous, as it, almost paradoxically, represents the epiphenomenon of decadence :

Tutte le volte che l’artista, e generalmente sono cattivi artisti, diventa confessore, agitatore, consigliere, privato o pubblico, c’è una civiltà che vuol morire [...] All’arte non dev’essere assegnato un dominio illimitato ed imprescritto. Le ragioni sono morali, d’ordine e di salute, non meno che formali.<sup>110</sup>

As they reject content to safeguard form, *La Ronda*’s intellectuals base their project of modernity entirely on the retrieval of the style inherited by the masters of classical tradition. In order to be able to carry out their project, they reconstruct the Italian classical tradition as a tradition developed in terms of form rather than content and a tradition of detachment from social and political activity.

The author who best represents this kind of tradition is considered to be Giacomo Leopardi, whose writings (and in particular the critical speculation gathered in his *Zibaldone*) are used by the *rondisti* both as an important stylistic model and as

an example of the possibility of reconciling *classicità* and modernity, indeed as an example of how classicism can in fact be a form of modernity.<sup>111</sup> This is clearly stated by Cardarelli in his *Prologo al Testamento Letterario di Giacomo Leopardi*, where he rereads Leopardi's 'teoria dell'eleganza' as the quest for a style which should be classical and modern at the same time :

Della teoria dell'eleganza Leopardi si servì in maniera inconfutabile: 1) per adombrare un tipo di stile classico e moderno ch'egli vagheggiava e che fu poi il suo, presupposto non trascurabile; 2) per gettare alcuni colpi d'occhio da maestro sul corso storico e l'indole delle diverse letterature e della nostra in particolare; 3) per oltrepassare il concetto vocabolaristico che della lingua s'eran fatto i Puristi e i Romantici al tempo suo e giungere a una grande e storica visione dello stile.<sup>112</sup>

Leopardi is therefore appropriated as an example of fusion between classicism and modernity and of historical reading of the notion of style. His classicism is interpreted as a formal category and, in particular, as a way to perpetuate the Italian literary language initiated by the *trecentisti* without suppressing its history. The recovery of Leopardi is used by the *rondisti* to prove the legitimacy and validity of their project : Leopardi 'volendo parere il più antico, [...] fu in effetti il più moderno dei suoi contemporanei, quegli che meno idoleggiò il passato, nemmeno per annullarlo, che è la forma di idolatria più selvaggia.'<sup>113</sup> His approach to literary tradition as a way to achieve modernity is polemically opposed to the blind iconoclasm of a modernity without historical roots, such as that represented by avant-garde movements, in particular by Futurism. Leopardi looked at the past with the eyes of a 'moderno illuminato', seeking to revive those elements of an ideal form of civilization which he found in antiquity. Angelo Cicchetti and Giovanni Ragone notice that the position of formal synthesis that the *rondisti* assume is to a certain



extent contradictory, but, given the post-war context, unavoidable. They point out the complexities of the relationship between the *rondisti* and the early Twentieth century literary avant-garde and how the pre-war experience is not exclusively rejected by them, but in fact used in the construction of a new literary project.<sup>114</sup> In this sense *La Ronda's leopardismo* is to be read within the framework of the contradictions and ambiguities which characterize the periodical, and the unusual rereading of Leopardi's work operated by the *rondisti* has the aim of placing Leopardi within *La Ronda's* aesthetic position.<sup>115</sup> In particular, the chronology of Leopardi's work proposed by the *rondisti* is peculiar: in his article *Cronologia leopardiana* Cardarelli maintains that there is an ideal chronology for Leopardi's *Canti* -which does not correspond to the established one- according to which Leopardi's production should be divided into two phases: the *Canti* and the *Operette morali*. Although the *Operette* are written before the later *Canti*, Cardarelli argues that the *Canti* represent a conceptual unit and that, regardless of the established chronology (he claims that 'il sospetto è filtrato nella cronologia dei *Canti*, per opera di Leopardi medesimo' and he believes that 'le pergamene abbiano imbrogliato i loro consultatori miopi'<sup>116</sup>) it is legitimate to believe that the *Canti* 'siano stati scritti tutti prima delle *Operette*'.<sup>117</sup> According to such a chronology, the *Operette morali* represent a more developed stage and constitute 'uno sviluppo ulteriore e risolutivo rispetto ai *Canti*' to such an extent as to represent 'il coronamento dell'opera leopardiana'.<sup>118</sup> Cicchetti and Ragone use this argument, together with the concept -developed by Cardarelli- of *decadenza del genio*<sup>119</sup>, to explain four interrelated points in *La Ronda's* aesthetics:

- 1) all the great artistic personalities undergo a process of artistic evolution which starts with the acquisition and elaboration of traditional forms, until such forms reach their perfection and the process ends with the achievement of artistic

forms which are less “pure” but more original, new and free ;

2) the transition from the “pure” or “primitive” forms to the new forms coincides with a changed attitude towards life: the forms that represented the artist’s relationship with reality are no longer adequate to the new situation, characterized by a sense of “misery and void” ;

3) in this theoretical context, as far as Leopardi is concerned, the process described above takes place between the *Canti* and the *Operette morali* : the *Operette* are born from the classical structure of the *Canti* but they are less “pure” and scholastic, more open and new ;

4) according to the concept of ‘decadenza del genio’ such a process of formal development can be applied not only to single artists but also to literary history, therefore the classical epoch can be compared to the primitive “lyrical moment” and the modern epoch to the stage of *decadenza del genio*. However, the contemporary decadent phase is not based on the previous literary experience and is therefore prone to any kind of disruption, as it lacks the preliminary work on language, from which only style can be created.<sup>120</sup>

This reading of Leopardi in the context of a revision of literary history has been interpreted as yet another example of the ambiguity of *La Ronda*’s position. In this respect Cicchetti and Ragone argue that it is to be seen as

un tentativo di sintesi di una serie di antinomie: sentirsi partecipi delle esperienze delle avanguardie e tuttavia rifiutarne sostanzialmente i metodi; cercare un’alternativa nella tradizione classica ed essere consapevoli dell’irripetibilità di certi modelli; essere dei decadenti ed avere tuttavia nostalgia per la classicità. E siccome non è possibile per loro far proprio completamente nessuno dei due termini della contraddizione in cui si trovano -quello *moderno* perché non *vogliono*, quello classico perché non *possono*- il risultato del loro lavoro è questo strano connubio di decadenza e classicità’.<sup>121</sup>

If Leopardi represents the tradition to be retrieved and nourished, in the name of a synthesis of classicism and modernity as the starting point for the reconstruction of an alternative modernity to that which destroyed itself in the great fire of the war, one of the main target of the *rondisti*'s polemical attacks is Futurism, which represents the antithesis to *La Ronda*'s notion of formal order. In an article by Emilio Cecchi, published in the May 1919 issue of *La Ronda*, Futurism is polemically defined as a form of barbarism which invaded the 'gray and levelling epoch of Cast Iron and Big Business', 'né più né meno di quelle epoche remotissime e tenebrose nelle quali erano discesi i Popoli Nordici e si erano avuti gli Scismi e gli Antipapi.'<sup>122</sup> Futurism is also associated with bolshevik anarchy, heresy, Masonry, and is described as representing 'il ritorno alla bestia, alla materia, al deforme'<sup>123</sup>, therefore as anti-order and anti-Italian. Lorenzo Montano defines it as a movement which 'raccolse [...] tutte le scemenze internazionali, tutti i rancidumi delle più rancide romanticherie, delle lucubrazioni più insipide, e ne fece una specie di macchina da turismo catafratta.'<sup>124</sup> The critique of Futurism is also carried out within the framework of *leopardismo* : through the recovery of Leopardi the *rondisti* attack North-European Romanticism and associate Futurism with it, thereby depriving it of any connotation of *italianità*. At the same time they demonstrate how the formal revolution operated by the futurists, instead of being a form of innovation meant to give freedom to artistic expression, represents rather a form of regression. Cicchetti and Ragone observe that a critique of Futurism conducted through Leopardi's polemics against Romanticism not only gives it a specific authority but also grants the argument theoretical credibility : the *rondisti*'s operation, in fact, is not the arbitrary transposition of a judgement from one literary period to another, but it



proceeds according to a system of dichotomized aesthetic categories and values, ‘in cui *classico* è contrapposto a *romantico*, *modernità* a *decadenza*, *tradizione rinnovata* a *innovazione arbitraria*, *stile a forma*, *lingua nazionale* a *sperimentazione linguistica*, *eleganza costruita* a *spontaneità espressiva*.’<sup>125</sup> The conclusion drawn by the two scholars is that the two categories created by such dichotomies are fundamentally related to the notions of “classical” and “romantic” and are applied to any literary movement from the nineteenth century onwards. According to this categorization the *rondisti* maintain that a literary system which does not take into account the whole of the preceding literary history not only does not achieve any real innovation but it demonstrates a fundamental incapacity to create the new. Immediacy and freedom belong to primitive literature. The literary expression which is historically at the end of a process of elaboration can only conceive of freedom by mastering all the techniques and rules established by tradition.<sup>126</sup> The only form literary modernity can assume is therefore that of a “renewed tradition”, based on the added awareness that as far as Italy is concerned there is only a “classical” tradition which, as such, can be continued and renewed against the linguistic experimentation of non-Italian romantic decadence.

As the early twentieth century Italian avant-garde is interpreted as the culmination of a process of the degeneration of Italian literary tradition, which started with Romanticism, the *rondisti* reread the literary history of the nineteenth century as a process which, after Leopardi, turned into progressive decadence with the *Scapigliatura* movement, Carducci and classicist rhetoric. Italy, therefore, produced literature of European value before being a unified country, while after unification it only had a provincial literature. According to *La Ronda* this phenomenon is due precisely to those who tried to adapt literature to the idea of a unified Italy, namely

the romantics, who promoted Tuscan as the Italian and “popular” language, and De Sanctis, who identified the history of Italy with that of its literature and art. Due to these causes the great linguistic and literary tradition which started with the *Cinquecento* was lost and lost with it was the European scope of Italian literature.<sup>127</sup> De Sanctis, in particular, is accused, because of his eminently historical interests, to have subverted the canon, especially as far as the sixteenth century is concerned :

Chi sarebbe disposto, oggi [...] a ritenere l’Aretino lo scrittore classico di quell’epoca che fu della grande e bella prosa del Caro, del Castiglione, del Machiavelli, del Davanzati, del Firenzuola, del Cellini stesso ? Chi oserebbe più ormai anteporre a que’ nostri perfettissimi scrittori accademici e di Corte, di ben altro sapore, attualità ed importanza, il latino di Merlin Cocai o il comunismo linguistico di alcuni novellatori anacronistici e di scarto, verbigrazia il Lasca, lo Straparola e cento altri ?<sup>128</sup>

According to the *rondisti*, only a man with the mentality of a moralist and of a ‘uomo del quarantotto’<sup>129</sup> could promote such a subversive reading of the literature of the *Cinquecento*, whose end result is to instil in the reader contempt rather than appreciation for literature.

A crucial occasion for the clarification on the part of the *rondisti* of their position on a problematic version of literary modernity is the “referendum” promoted by *La Ronda* in October 1919 whose question is ‘che cosa ne pensate voi di Pascoli?’. The contributions to this referendum, published between November 1919 and January 1920 under the title *Discussione su Pascoli*, are for the *rondisti* of fundamental importance with regard to their definition of literary modernity and their attitude towards a modernity which has already established itself and has been almost

canonized as such. In Cecchi's words, 'la questione Pascoli è il ponte d'asino della tanto asserita nostra modernità letteraria e dalla maggiore o minore franchezza con cui verrà risolta si potrà vedere se questa modernità esiste e sa quel che vuole o non è, anch'essa, una comoda ipotesi rettorica.'<sup>130</sup> As a matter of fact, the results of the referendum show that the contributors are more interested in developing an adequate critical discourse to deal with Pascoli's poetry rather than in evaluating Pascoli *per se* and establishing whether the version of modernity deriving from him is acceptable as such. It is significant that in the January 1921 issue *La Ronda*'s editorial board publishes an article where it complains about the lack of response to the referendum on the part of Pascoli's supporters, as 'i pascoliani, di maniera o no, hanno taciuto, taciuto da degradarne il più onesto pesce del mare. Gli antipascoliani eravamo noi, e press'a poco abbiamo parlato.'<sup>131</sup> What emerges from the contributions of the *antipascoliani* (mainly Cecchi, Gargiulo, Bacchelli and to some extent Thovez) is almost a position of critical *impasse*: Pascoli, in fact, represents 'il ponte d'asino della modernità', because his modernity cannot be dismissed like that of the futurists, but the instruments of critical enquiry possessed by contemporary critics seem to be inadequate to deal with it, in particular within the parameters established by *La Ronda*'s "men of order". For this reason, the debate on Pascoli concentrates as much on Croce's *Saggio su Pascoli*<sup>132</sup> as on Pascoli's poetry itself. In his essay not only does Croce separate Pascoli from the tradition that links Leopardi with Manzoni - defined as a tradition of 'anime [...] energiche e tumultuose e grandiose pur nella depressione della tristezza o nella calma della religiosità'<sup>133</sup> - and insert him in a tradition of 'poeti idillici', but he also gives an overall negative evaluation of Pascoli's poetry, defining him as 'uno strano miscuglio di spontaneità e d'artificio' and ultimately 'un piccolo-grande poeta'. However, before presenting his critical



evaluation on the poet as a simple solution to the Pascoli question, Croce himself admits that the poet constitutes a critical problem:

si ode lamentare non essere il Pascoli giudicato degnamente, perché la critica italiana è inferiore al compito suo ; ed altri scusano la critica considerando l'arte del Pascoli come un'arte dell'avvenire, che solo in una nuova fase spirituale potrà essere compresa a dovere. Sarà dunque così ? fallimento della critica ? o rinvio all'avvenire ?<sup>134</sup>

Croce's essay represents the starting point for the *rondisti*'s analysis not only of Pascoli's poetry, but of modernity itself and of their controversial relationship with Croce. In particular, Cecchi and Gargiulo's contributions to the debate, both of which appeared in the November 1919 issue, take polemical issue with Croce's treatment of Pascoli's poetry : Cecchi criticizes Croce's 'maniera di sbrigarsi di certe questioni, come aveva fatto, indistintamente, per Rimbaud e per Claudel, per Baudelaire e per Barrès e ora faceva per Pascoli'<sup>135</sup> and Gargiulo finds Croce's essay unsatisfactory, as it lacks 'quella raffinata complicatezza psicologica che il soggetto gravemente morboso rende [...] necessaria'<sup>136</sup>. Cecchi's analysis places Pascoli in the context of his time, whereas Gargiulo stresses the critical problems posed by Pascoli's poetry. In particular, the attempt to justify and convey at a critical level the quality of "ineffabilità" that it presents (by Cecchi and Serra for instance) is perceived by Gargiulo as the real problem in terms of the establishment of rigorous aesthetic criteria.

That Pascoli represents, whatever the judgement on his poetry, poetic modernity, is the main argument of Cesare Angelini's contribution to the debate. According to him, in fact, Pascoli 'non ha ancora finito di essere un poeta nuovo, per quello che ha aggiunto alla tradizione'<sup>137</sup> and his poetry can certainly be considered

“pure poetry” (‘poesia pura’) although insufficient from the point of view of form, which places him in the category of poets that Angelini calls ‘donatori di canto’, a separate category from the ‘poeti grandissimi cioè senza limiti e capaci di sostenere le più alte esigenze espressive’<sup>138</sup>, that are represented by Dante, Leopardi and Petrarch.

Natale Scalia goes beyond the definition of Pascoli as “new” and indeed claims that it is impossible to solve the problem presented by Pascoli with the instruments provided by the critical methodology inspired by Croce. He comments : ‘Insomma, oggi, Pascoli non si risolve. Prima bisogna affrontare molti problemi laterali e dubitiamo che sia lavoro imminente. Una confusione nervosa (grotteschi, colorazioni, incubi, sogni) sta per sommergere le più elementari conquiste crociane.’<sup>139</sup>

According to Scalia, therefore, Pascoli’s poetry defies contemporary critical analysis: it needs the development of a new critical approach, as it represents the source of all poetic modernity. Pascoli is, in fact, in Scalia’s words ‘il dominatore spirituale della nostra generazione e più sarà della prossima: e, almeno per un secolo, ha distrutto la possibilità di far dell’altra poesia.’<sup>140</sup>

Enrico Thovez too finds Croce’s explanation of the poetic enigma represented by Pascoli too simplistic. He claims that in order to analyse his poetry it is necessary to take into account the poet’s psychology and that it is not possible to separate ‘il Pascoli poeta dritto e puro dal Pascoli poeta contorto e affettato: sono iscindibili.’<sup>141</sup> He finally compares Pascoli to Petrarch, as a poet who shares Pascoli’s poetic sensitivity. However, he continues, since Petrarch is ‘tra quelli che la tradizione ha consacrato classici’, he benefits from the respect and the exoneration of time. Pascoli, on the contrary is “modern” and as such he cannot benefit from the indulgence reserved to a “god” of poetry. He is only an “idol”. But, Thovez concludes, “‘idolo”

non fu forse per i petrarchisti anche il Petrarca?’<sup>142</sup>

The debate on Pascoli does not reach a real conclusion, but, as Manacorda points out<sup>143</sup>, it has a function of clarification for the *rondisti*: their fundamentally negative evaluation of Pascoli’s poetry is consistent with their notion of literature as stylistic rigour and sobriety. However, the debate also shows that a modernity like that represented by Pascoli is difficult to deal with just in terms of a pre-established notion of style and requires a revision of acquired critical methodologies.

Although literature for the *rondisti* has no other purpose than ‘diletto’, it is attributed a cognitive as well as an existential aspect. For this reason, the choice of continuing a specific tradition is presented as an existential choice :

L’arte è un modo di conoscere ; conoscere è un modo di vivere : vivere non è, forse, che un modo di creare.

Si fa dell’arte per creare se stessi, per creare il proprio futuro, per divenire, metafisicamente. Scegliere una forma d’arte è quindi altrettanto arbitrario quanto scegliere la donna, che risponde al nostro bisogno oscuro di continuare la razza. Per questo cerchiamo sempre un qualche legame con gli antecessori, cerchiamo di essere d’accordo con la tradizione : per non degenerare. Un’opera d’arte è un figlio dello spirito : rappresenta il futuro della razza e il passato dell’individuo.<sup>144</sup>

This almost ethical need to continue tradition and to preserve style in order not to degenerate has often been interpreted as the defence of those intellectuals against the political situation : Giorgio Luti, in particular, points out that, although *La Ronda*’s isolation represents its more or less unconscious surrender to the threat posed by political events at the time, on the other hand it has a defensive function, for its ‘ricerca di una dignità che salvasse dal naufragio almeno le tradizionali e “sacrosante” conquiste dell’arte’.<sup>145</sup>



However, the ambiguities of such a position are obvious<sup>146</sup> and significant, in this respect, is Lorenzo Montano's comment, written in 1928 :

L'opera di Benito Mussolini non sarebbe tuttavia quella che è, se non fosse rampollata oscuramente da radici profonde sottili e diffuse tanto da andar ben oltre una formazione politica, e sia pur vasta quanto si vuole. Lo accusano di aver distrutto gli ordinamenti liberali. La verità ormai evidente è che questi furono uccisi dalla guerra che avevano figliato. Chi riprende in mano i fascicoli della "Ronda", troverà più d'una riprova di tale carattere necessario, o meglio destinato, agli eventi seguiti poi ; riprove notabili soprattutto per trovarsi in una rassegna di purissime lettere. E si accorgerà che i compilatori avevano il sentimento di vivere tra rovine e cadaveri non soltanto letterari [...]

Presentimenti oscuri, e che la loro oscurità solamente può rendere meritevoli di ricordo, se mostri quanto innanzi, anche tra i più appartati, si preparava la strada a chi era per venire. Di quel che accadde noi fummo testimoni preparati e senza sorpresa ; né saremmo noi a credere che il passato sia rimediabile, e che il tempo possa volgere indietro il proprio cammino.<sup>147</sup>

In conclusion, both *Valori Plastici* and *La Ronda* carry out similar projects, based on the concept of the "return to order" and the quest for a new *classicità*. Both periodicals present a variety of readings of the notion of *classicità*, which shows the complex and problematic quality that characterizes this concept in the immediate post-war period. Despite their call for a return to tradition, both periodicals claim for their projects the attribute of "modern". For this reason they present their rereading of the notion of "classical" within the quest for a lost *italianità* : the recovery of the true and pure Italian tradition, both in literature and in the visual arts, is seen as a way to create a new modernity, to be opposed to an avant-garde, which is considered as fundamentally alien to the Italian spirit and which, before the war, proposed a version of modernity based on cultural models imported from the north of Europe. The traditional notion of *classicità* as harmony achieved through simplicity and magnificence is retained but, at the same time, deliberately disrupted. The new

*classicità* begins to emerge as *inquieta*, as it is presented as politically charged and striving to find its place within modernity.

<sup>1</sup> *Valori Plastici* was published between 1918 and 1922 ; *La Ronda* was published between 1919 and 1923.

<sup>2</sup> On the periodical *La Raccolta* see Lia Fava Guzzetta, 'Un incunabolo della "Ronda": "La Raccolta"', in *Percorsi di scrittura letteraria nel 900 italiano* (Roma: Gruppo editoriale internazionale, 1993), pp. 77-89.

<sup>3</sup> Luisa Mangoni, *L'interventismo della cultura. Intellettuali e riviste del fascismo* (Roma-Bari: Laterza, 1974), p. 31.

<sup>4</sup> Marino Biondi, '"La Ronda" e il rondismo', in *Storia letteraria d'Italia*, ed. by Armando Balduino (Padova : Piccin, 1993), X, p. 664.

<sup>5</sup> *Valori Plastici* was published in Rome between 1918 and 1922 and was edited by the painter and art critic Mario Broglio, helped by his wife, the paintress Edita Walterowna zur Muehlen. Its main contributors were Giorgio De Chirico, his brother Alberto Savinio (his real name was Andrea De Chirico), Carlo Carrà and Italo Tadolato. It hosted articles by, among others, Emilio Cecchi, Giuseppe Raimondi, Filippo De Pisis, Matteo Marangoni. It was devoted to visual arts and it published theoretical essays, articles on Italian and foreign art, reviews of exhibitions and books and reproductions of works by contemporary painters and sculptors, among whom were De Chirico, Carrà, Picasso, Braque, Severini, Soffici, Morandi, Fattori, and Edita Walterowna.

<sup>6</sup> *L'interventismo della cultura*, p. 33.

<sup>7</sup> Among which the famous *Le muse inquietanti* (1917).

<sup>8</sup> On the "discovery" of metaphysical art by De Chirico and the artist's subsequent years in Paris, cfr. Maurizio Fagiolo Dell'Arco, 'De Chirico in Paris, 1911-1915', in *De Chirico*, edited by William Rubin (New York: The Museum of Modern Art, 1982), pp. 11-34.

<sup>9</sup> Gérard-Georges Lemaire maintains that Carrà's 'svolta metafisica' should not be interpreted as mere reaction to his futurist past, but as the result of the convergence of several aspirations: 'La prima è la definizione della "nuova immagine dell'arte", mediante la quale egli afferma l'indivisibilità della coppia stabilità/movimento, che significa anche la stretta interdipendenza tra modernismo e tradizione. La seconda [...] è la reintroduzione dei valori tipici della pittura italiana del primo Rinascimento, con la conseguente accezione dello spazio secondo la geometria euclidea, l'architettura delle forme essendo la principale fonte di significato. La terza risponde all'impellente bisogno di affermare una dimensione spirituale [...] che secondo lui è assente nelle opere naturaliste della seconda metà del XIX secolo e ancor più nelle opere d'avanguardia dell'inizio del XX.' ('L'itinerario artistico di Carlo Carrà', in Massimo Carrà, Ester Coen and Gérard-Georges Lemaire, *Carlo Carrà* (Firenze: Giunti, 1987), p. 18

<sup>10</sup> Cited in *Carlo Carrà*, p. 40.

<sup>11</sup> Joan M. Lukach, 'De Chirico and Italian Art Theory', in *De Chirico*, p. 35.

<sup>12</sup> Paolo Fossati, *Valori Plastici 1918-1922* (Torino : Einaudi, 1981), p. 3.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 3-7.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 31: 'si sbaglierebbe, però, a ritenere che la polemica antifuturista avvenisse solo in nome dell'arte. Non va dimenticato che il futurismo fu, nel primo periodo della Rivoluzione russa, l'esperienza artistica che più naturalmente si veniva collegando al moto rivoluzionario di quel tempo...'

<sup>16</sup> Alberto Savinio, 'Arte = Idee Moderne', *Valori Plastici*, 15 November 1918, p. 3.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 4.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 4-5.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 6.

<sup>21</sup> 'arte moderna' is always ironically written by Savinio in italics, so as to constantly question its validity as applied to avant-garde art and to insist on the necessity of reformulating the concept of artistic modernity according to anti-avant-garde criteria.

<sup>22</sup> 'Arte=Idee Moderne', p. 7.

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 6.

<sup>24</sup> Cfr. Peter Bürger, *Theory of the Avant-garde*, trans. by Michael Shaw (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1984), pp. 53-54.

<sup>25</sup> 'Arte=Idee Moderne', pp. 3-4.

<sup>26</sup> As far as the relationship between the *Valori Plastici* artists and Futurism is concerned, cfr. Paolo Fossati, *Valori Plastici. 1918-1922*, p. 76 : 'L'elogio dell'inuguaglianza, o l'antisocialismo [...]



propone una soluzione degli intelligenti e la definizione del loro potere : [...] un elemento comune al futurismo [...]

la realtà sociale di massa, la fluidità dei ruoli e delle figure della società che si va trasformando pongono un problema preciso : restituire un volto al lavoro intellettuale, alla creatività.'

<sup>27</sup> *Valori Plastici* 1918-1922, p. 7

<sup>28</sup> Italo Tavolato, 'Introduzione al classicismo', *Valori Plastici*, year III, n.4, p. 75.

<sup>29</sup> *Valori Plastici* 1918-1922, p. 9.

<sup>30</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 9-10.

<sup>31</sup> Cfr. Chapter 1 of this thesis.

<sup>32</sup> Lettera a Soffici (26 December 1921), cited in Elena Pontiggia, 'Classicismo, tradizionalismo, moderna classicità', in *L'idea del classico 1916-1932. Temi classici nell'arte italiana degli anni Venti*, ed. by Elena Pontiggia and Marco Quemada (Milano : Fabbri, 1992), p. 40.

<sup>33</sup> The article is part of Carrà's book *Pittura Metafisica*, published by Vallecchi in 1919.

<sup>34</sup> 'L' "Italianismo artistico"', *Valori Plastici*, April-May 1919, p. 2.

<sup>35</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>36</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 5.

<sup>37</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 4.

<sup>38</sup> 'Il rinnovamento della pittura in Italia', part III, *Valori Plastici*, March-April 1920, p. 34.

<sup>39</sup> 'Il rinnovamento della pittura in Italia', part IV, *Valori Plastici*, May-June 1920, p. 53.

<sup>40</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 54.

<sup>41</sup> Three articles entitled 'Canova e il neoclassicismo', published between December 1920 and February 1921.

<sup>42</sup> 'Il ritorno al mestiere', *Valori Plastici*, November-December 1919, p. 18.

<sup>43</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 19.

<sup>44</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>45</sup> *Valori Plastici* 1918-1922, p. 155.

<sup>46</sup> *Valori Plastici*, April-May 1919, pp. 15-18.

<sup>47</sup> 'Il senso architettonico nella pittura antica', *Valori Plastici*, May-June 1920, p. 59.

<sup>48</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 60.

<sup>49</sup> ' "Anadioménon". Principi di valutazione dell'arte contemporanea', *Valori Plastici*, April-May 1919, p. 8.

<sup>50</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>51</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 10.

<sup>52</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 14.

<sup>53</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>54</sup> Within the *Valori Plastici* group the positions are not always uniform. As far as the issue of irony is concerned, Carrà, conceives of irony as an element in modern art which artists use sometimes unconsciously. This -he claims- happens when art abandons its superior aims. Irony is defined as a disease and the main fault of a period of decadence, as it is a sign that 'le facoltà primordiali dello spirito non operano più, o operano in maniera fiacca, inorganica e contraddittoria'. Carrà sees irony as a fundamental manifestation of pessimism and invokes its dissolution through the 'ardore consapevole di una nuova fede. Ad essa compete il dominio dell'avvenire.' Cfr. Carlo Carrà, 'Misticità e ironia nella pittura contemporanea', *Valori Plastici*, year II, n. VII-VIII, pp. 69-73. After the May-June 1920 issue (Year II, n.V-VI) the issues are marked only with the number and no longer the month and year of publication.

<sup>55</sup> *Valori Plastici*, June-October 1919, pp. 17-21.

<sup>56</sup> 'Fini dell'Arte', p. 17.

<sup>57</sup> However, De Chirico stresses that the fact that a new, "metaphysical" art was born in Italy can be considered a 'fatalità geografica' ; that, in fact, could not happen, for instance, in France, where 'la talentuosità facilona ed il ben coltivato gusto artistico, mescolato a quella tal dose di *esprit* [...] che infarina il 99 per cento degli abitanti di Parigi, soffoca ed inceppa lo sviluppo di uno spirito profetico.' (Cfr. 'Sull'arte metafisica', p. 16)

<sup>58</sup> 'Fini dell'arte', p.19.

<sup>59</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>60</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 21.

<sup>61</sup> Cfr. *Valori Plastici* 1918-1922, p. 77.

<sup>62</sup> The debate was published in the issues n. 3 and 4 (1921) and hosted contributions by Giorgio De Chirico, Lionello Venturi, Carlo Carrà, Curt Suckert, Emilio Cecchi, Raffaello Franchi, Cipriano



Efisio Oppo, Eva Tea, Massimo Bontempelli, Margherita Sarfatti.

<sup>63</sup> Giorgio De Chirico, 'La Mania del Seicento', *Valori Plastici*, Year III, n.3, p. 61.

<sup>64</sup> Evidence of De Chirico's desire to partially redeem Caravaggio and to show that the target of his critique is the bourgeois spirit of North-European art rather than Caravaggio's painting is given by his claim that the bourgeois elements in Caravaggio 'hanno qualcosa di stonato e di falso', as they are interpreted by 'un italiano bilioso, spadaccino ed errabondo, inquieto, scontento e jettato fino all'osso, quindi uomo antiborghese per eccellenza.' ('La mania del Seicento', p. 62)

<sup>65</sup> 'La mania del Seicento', p. 61.

<sup>66</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 61-62.

<sup>67</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 62.

<sup>68</sup> Carlo Carrà, 'Il Seicento e la critica italiana', *Valori Plastici*, year III, n.4, p. 79.

<sup>69</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>70</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 79-80.

<sup>71</sup> Because of the preference accorded by Carrà to these artists, Soffici accused him of 'arcaismo'. In a letter to Carrà dated 4 January 1921 Soffici wrote: 'Quello che ho visto ultimamente di tuo mi ha fatto l'impressione che tu ti accanisca intorno a un problema insolubile o quasi on i mezzi che adoperi. Insomma, tu cerchi la grande opera pittorica, un ripristinamento dell'ordine artistico, ecc. e va bene. Ma tu lo fai senza uscire dalle forme d'altri tempi, secondo me svuotate ormai di significati pregnanti e perciò sterili o morte.' On 14 March 1921 Carrà wrote: 'Ma se tu, caro Soffici, continuerai a rimproverarmi l'arcaismo, ti dirò che nello sviluppo del mio spirito, anche questo senso mi è necessario.' Both letters are cited in Massimo Carrà, Ester Coen, Gérard-Georges Lemaire, *Carlo Carrà* (Firenze: Giunti, 1987), p. 55. As early as 1916 Carrà had written two articles entitled 'Parlata su Giotto' (*La Voce*, 31 March 1916) and 'Paolo Uccello costruttore' (*La Voce*, 30 September 1916) where he had claimed that it was necessary to rediscover and revalue these two artists. In particular, in the article on Giotto, he declared: 'Io, comprendo la pittura di Giotto, perché il mio ideale pitturale contiene quella pittura.' (*La Voce*, 30 September 1916, p. 167).

<sup>72</sup> Emilio Cecchi, *Valori Plastici*, year III, n. 4, p. 88 (the article has no title).

<sup>73</sup> Cipriano Efisio Oppo, 'Discussioni inutili', *Valori Plastici*, year III, n. 4, p. 90.

<sup>74</sup> Massimo Bontempelli, *Valori Plastici*, year III, n. 4, p. 94 (the article has no title).

<sup>75</sup> On Margherita Sarfatti, her life, and her political and artistic activities see the comprehensive biography by Philip Cannistraro and Brian Sullivan, *Margherita Sarfatti. L'altra donna del Duce*, trans. by Carla Lazzari (Milano: Mondadori, 1993).

<sup>76</sup> Margherita Sarfatti, 'Il Seicento', *Valori Plastici*, year III, n. 4, p. 95.

<sup>77</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>78</sup> Sarfatti's dislike of Caravaggio and seventeenth-century art can be traced back to her intense reading of Ruskin's work in her teenage years. This is particularly evident from the following letter she wrote to the art critic Bernard Berenson later in her life: 'Beh, francamente, più lo [Caravaggio] vedo, meno lo amo. Certo, è un grande pittore e un maestro della sua arte. Ma anche uno spirito così sgradevole, così, posso dirlo?, volgare. Anzi, abietto. [...] Caravaggio prende a soggetto creature belle, ori e broccati, corpi e facce giovani e attraenti e questi si trasformano in un fango infernale. Forse sono antiquata a dare ancora valore all'anima e alla nobiltà. Forse i miei anni ruskiniani mi hanno ancorato, da quando avevo quindici o dieci anni, a idee vecchie, e perché no? a ideali vecchi.' (Cited in Philip Cannistraro and Brian Sullivan, *Margherita Sarfatti*, pp. 27-28)

<sup>79</sup> Curzio Suckert, 'Commemorazione del Seicento', *Valori Plastici*, year III, n. 4, p. 81.

<sup>80</sup> The term 'metafisico' has not in Suckert the same meaning as that given to the term by the theorists of metaphysical painting: 'metafisico' is here opposed to 'plastico' and describes what is 'non fisico' and, in particular, the spiritual tension that in Suckert's view is typical of the spirit of the Reformation, characterized by anxiety and irony.

<sup>81</sup> 'Commemorazione del Seicento', p. 81.

<sup>82</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 82.

<sup>83</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>84</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>85</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 83-84.

<sup>86</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 86.

<sup>87</sup> *Valori Plastici 1918-1922*, pp. 33-34. Fossati adds: 'In questo modo sono affermate prima di tutto alcune procedure: la condizione di non marginalità dell'arte italiana sull'arte italiana su quella europea, oggi; poi, le motivazioni in base alle quali si ha un pieno possesso di strumenti ideativi e operativi, e sull'asse della tradizione e su quello della contemporaneità. Per cui la questione non è solo di tipo



orizzontale, fra Italia ed Europa, ma pure verticale: dove la tradizione non è solo coscienza di una certa pienezza poetica ma questa trova geograficamente i propri oggetti e le proprie espressioni in modo diretto e non per astrazioni culturali.' (p. 33)

<sup>88</sup> The periodical *La Ronda* was published in Rome between April 1919 and December 1923 ; its editorial board was composed of Vincenzo Cardarelli, Emilio Cecchi, Antonio Baldini, Lorenzo Montano, Riccardo Bacchelli, Bruno Barilli, Aurelio Saffi, Armando Spadini. Among its contributors it is worth remembering Vilfredo Pareto, Antonio Gargiulo, Adriano Tilgher, Giuseppe Raimondi, Carlo Linati, Alberto Savinio, Giorgio De Chirico, Ardengo Soffici. It hosted mainly articles and essays devoted to literature and book reviews. Only occasionally, articles were devoted to the visual arts, politics or current affairs.

<sup>89</sup> Giuseppe Cassieri, introduction to "*La Ronda*" 1919-23, ed. by Giuseppe Cassieri (Roma : ERI, 1969), p. XXII.

<sup>90</sup> Fava Guzzetta opposes the *rondisti*'s attitude of 'sopravvissuti' to the ideal of renewal developed by other contemporary intellectual groups, such as those of Gobetti's *Energie Nove* and Gramsci's *Ordine Nuovo*. Cfr. Lia Fava Guzzetta, 'Ideologia e letteratura nella "Ronda"' in *Percorsi di scrittura letteraria nel '900 italiano* (Roma : Gruppo Editoriale Internazionale, 1993), p. 92.

<sup>91</sup> *Percorsi...*, p. 92.

<sup>92</sup> *L'interventismo della cultura*, pp. 39-40.

<sup>93</sup> Cfr. Lorenzo Montano, 'Medardo o una meditazione fra due tempi', *La Ronda*, April 1919.

<sup>94</sup> *L'interventismo della cultura*, p. 41.

<sup>95</sup> Vincenzo Cardarelli, 'Prologo in tre parti', *La Ronda*, April 1919, in "*La Ronda...*", p. 3.

<sup>96</sup> Lanfranco Caretti, 'Politica rondiana', in *Novecento. I contemporanei*, ed. by Gianni Grana (Milano : Marzorati, 1979), V, p. 3898.

<sup>97</sup> *La Ronda*, 'Aprile 1919-Aprile 1920', *La Ronda*, April 1920, in "*La Ronda*" 1919-1923, p. 269.

<sup>98</sup> The *rondisti* are constantly aware of apparent cultural paradox that their position represents. In 1920, in a summary of the first year's activity, they write: 'In questo soprattutto noi vedevamo, molto naturalmente, concorrere i due termini, apparentemente repugnanti, di classicismo e modernità, che costituiscono ancora oggi l'enigma della nostra posizione.' ('Aprile 1919-Aprile 1920', p. 270)

<sup>99</sup> Vincenzo Cardarelli, 'Prologo in tre parti', in "*La Ronda*"..., p. 4.

<sup>100</sup> Vincenzo Cardarelli, *Le opere e i giorni*, cited in Charles Burdett, 'The Success and Failure of Cardarelli's Neo-Classical Literary Project', *The Italianist*, 15 (1995), p. 129.

<sup>101</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>102</sup> Vincenzo Cardarelli, 'Prologo...', p. 5.

<sup>103</sup> 'Incontri e scontri. Propositi di critica', *La Ronda*, October 1919, p. 53.

<sup>104</sup> Vincenzo Cardarelli, 'Prologo...', p. 4.

<sup>105</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>106</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>107</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 5.

<sup>108</sup> Alfredo Gargiulo, 'Stile', *La Ronda*, August-September 1921, in "*La Ronda*"..., p. 452.

<sup>109</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>110</sup> *La Ronda*, 'Incontri e scontri', *La Ronda*, October 1919.

<sup>111</sup> Fava Guzzetta argues that, since Leopardi's thought as expressed in the *Operette Morali* and the *Zibaldone* had already received a considerable critical attention at the beginning of the century, *La Ronda*'s rereading of Leopardi does not represent an original and solid enough critical operation compared to the previous ones. ('Ideologia...', pp. 112-113).

<sup>112</sup> Vincenzo Cardarelli, 'Prologo al "Testamento Letterario di G. Leopardi"', *La Ronda*, March-April-May 1921, p. 128.

<sup>113</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 129.

<sup>114</sup> Cfr. Angelo Cicchetti and Giovanni Ragone, *Le muse e i consigli di fabbrica. Il progetto letterario della Ronda* (Roma : Bulzoni, 1979), p. 99: 'Anche quando i rondisti assumono nei confronti di esse [le esperienze letterarie del primo Novecento] toni polemici e incendiari, anche quando affermano che per attingere nuovi e validi risultati poetici è necessario mettere da parte tutti i tentativi precedentemente esperiti e ricominciare avendo come unica base la tradizione classica, la suggestione della ricerca precedente (in particolare della ricerca vociana : l'impressionismo, il frammentismo ; ma non sono da escludere neppure certi aspetti dell'avversato futurismo) rimane notevole, soprattutto sul piano formale ; non ci si propone tanto di ridurne il peso, quanto di assorbirne le acquisizioni più valide in una nuova sintesi formale, che dovrebbe risultare dalla dialettica dei due termini solo "apparentemente" ripugnanti di classicismo e modernità.'



<sup>115</sup> *Le muse...*, pp. 100-101.

<sup>116</sup> Vincenzo Cardarelli, 'Cronologia leopardiana', *La Ronda*, November 1919, p. 104.

<sup>117</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>118</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 102.

<sup>119</sup> According to this concept, explained by Cardarelli in the article *La decadenza del genio*, published in the September 1919 issue of *La Ronda* (pp. 67-69), once a lyric poet has achieved formal perfection, the abundance of means of expression becomes almost paralysing and the artist turns therefore to forms which are less perfect and somehow more "impure". However, this is not a sign of regression, but rather of progress, as the new forms are more disenchanted, free and in tune with his view of life. Therefore, the lyrical phase, although "pure" and accomplished, is considered "primitive", whereas the successive phase is considered more "adult". According to Cardarelli, this is the case with the work of such "geniuses" as Dante, Shakespeare, Goethe, Leopardi, Manzoni.

<sup>120</sup> Cfr. *Le muse...*, pp. 104-105.

<sup>121</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 109.

<sup>122</sup> Emilio Cecchi, 'Comunicazione Accademica', *La Ronda*, May 1919, in "*La Ronda*"..., p. 43. The article is the fictional account of the discovery, in the year 3009, of some fragments of a mysterious work, written 'nell'Epoca dei Grandi Affari', and entitled 'Zang-Tumb'. The article, written in the form of an academic report, is a polemical speculation on the origin of this piece of work and on the artistic movement of which it was a product, as there was no trace left of it and its work in literary history.

<sup>123</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 45.

<sup>124</sup> Lorenzo Montano, 'Il diavolo invecchia', *La Ronda*, October 1921.

<sup>125</sup> *Le muse...*, p. 119.

<sup>126</sup> Cfr. *Le muse...*, pp. 118-120.

<sup>127</sup> Cfr. Riccardo Bacchelli, 'Sur la condition présent des lettres italiennes', *La Ronda*, October-November 1920, cited in *Le muse...*, p. 112: 'Fu fatta grandissima e capitale violenza alla nostra civiltà letteraria, e capovolta la tradizione. Dove non si trattava d'altro che di una necessità personale, d'artista, Manzoni introdusse e praticò tutto un sovvertimento radicale di dottrina e di gusto [...] fino all'attuale romanzismo sconcio. Gli oppositori e i diversi non seppero meglio che instaurare "una sorta di barbarie erudita", rinnovando quanto ebbe di più gretto l'orgoglio vanissimo dei grammatici e dei letterati di consorteria e d'accademia; nacque una cultura ristrettissima ed irosa, impraticabile, inintelligibile, da sopravvissuti, cui si aggiunse un gusto di rigattieria di lusso sul corpo di questa sontuosa e morta Italia, con qualche acquisizione di fuori via troppo lesta e troppo utile, massoneggiante, come Michelet in Carducci; dilettantesca, come Nietzsche in D'Annunzio; e insulsa, come Rimbaud o Mallarmé e via via, che non si contano più modelli e mode delle nostre imitazioni scervellate, finché giustamente il Crémieux o chi altri voglia può dichiarare che noi non contiamo più niente e che non esiste una grande letteratura italiana, nemmeno come ricordo e professione di fede.'

<sup>128</sup> Vincenzo Cardarelli, 'Incontri e scontri. Del De Sanctis e della nostra lingua', *La Ronda*, June 1922, in "*La Ronda*"..., p. 534.

<sup>129</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 533.

<sup>130</sup> Emilio Cecchi, 'Discussione su Pascoli', *La Ronda*, November 1919, in "*La Ronda*"..., p. 149.

<sup>131</sup> *La Ronda*, 'Discussione su Pascoli' *La Ronda*, January 1920, in "*La Ronda*"..., p. 181.

<sup>132</sup> Published in 1907. *La Ronda*'s debate was inspired by a further comment on Pascoli's poetry (entitled 'Dodici Anni Dopo') published by Croce in the September 1919 issue of *La Critica*.

<sup>133</sup> Benedetto Croce, *Giovanni Pascoli. Studio Critico* (Bari: Laterza, 1962), p. 54.

<sup>134</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 63. Elsewhere in the essay he says: 'E così l'arte del Pascoli par che serbi sempre l'aspetto di un problema.' (p. 61)

<sup>135</sup> 'Discussione su Pascoli', p. 150. Croce's treatment of Baudelaire's poetry had already been criticized in the May 1919 issue, where, in a brief review of Croce's essay on Baudelaire, appeared in *La Critica* in March 1919, the *rondisti* (the review is signed "a.e.s."), although acknowledging Croce's scholarly method in investigating Baudelaire's biographical details, define his presentation of the French poet as 'una nozione monca e vaghissima, da manuale letterario per i R. Licei e Istituti tecnici del Regno, con apprezzamenti che si potrebbero ripetere per tutt'altri poeti, bozzettistici e umanitarii.' (pp. 61-62)

<sup>136</sup> Afredo Gargiulo, 'Discussione su Pascoli', *La Ronda*, November 1919, in "*La Ronda*"..., p. 155.

<sup>137</sup> Cesare Angelini, 'Discussione su Pascoli', *La Ronda*, November 1919, in "*La Ronda*"..., p. 162.

<sup>138</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 164.

<sup>139</sup> Natale Scalia, 'Discussione su Pascoli', *La Ronda*, November 1919, in "*La Ronda*"..., p. 168.

<sup>140</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>141</sup> Enrico Thovez, 'Discussione su Pascoli', *La Ronda*, January 1920, in "*La Ronda*"..., pp. 186-187.

<sup>142</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 189.

<sup>143</sup> Cfr. Giuliano Manacorda, *Dalla Ronda al Baretto. Gli intellettuali di fronte al fascismo negli anni '20* (Foggia : Bastogi, 1981), p. 97.

<sup>144</sup> P. E. Giusti, 'Incontri e scontri. Metafisiche', *La Ronda*, October 1919, p. 67.

<sup>145</sup> Giorgio Luti, *La Letteratura del ventennio fascista* (Firenze : La Nuova Italia, 1972), pp. 28-29.

<sup>146</sup> Cfr. Natalino Sapegno, *Compendio di storia della letteratura italiana*, 3 vols, (Firenze : La Nuova Italia, 1963-64), III, p. 448, Lanfranco Caretti, 'Politica rondiana', cit., pp. 3899-3900 and Pier Paolo Pasolini, 'La confusione degli stili' in *Passione e ideologia* (Milano : Garzanti, 1960), pp. 336-337. Marino Biondi has identified in some of *La Ronda*'s political comments a form of 'filoassolutismo' of which even the choice of classicism would be evidence: 'un assolutismo illuminato, che dia respiro alle lettere nell'ambito di una cortigianeria dignitosa, rispettosa delle competenze, sembra essere l'ideale da desumere da prese di posizione e commenti sparsi. Ciò che i rondisti rinnegano, con la reazione estetica ma ugualmente radicale del disgusto e forse della paura, è il potere composito delle democrazie di coalizione...' ('*La Ronda e il rondismo*', in *Storia letteraria d'Italia*, ed. by Armando Balduino, Padova: Piccin, 1993, XI, p. 679. Cfr. also Giuliano Manacorda's observation that 'tutta questa rivendicazione di una concezione aristocraticamente autonoma dell'attività letteraria ed artistica e della condizione di coloro che la praticano potrebbe ridursi a cosa ben semplice e vecchia se non si colorasse di quelle tinte particolari che le vengono dalla coscienza che hanno i rondisti della situazione reale o in via di maturazione in cui si trovano ad operare. Ma non è strano, anzi è caratteristico, che essi la sfiorino e quasi se ne ritraggano paghi di averle dedicato un bon mot distaccato e sufficiente.' (*Dalla Ronda al Baretto. Gli intellettuali di fronte al fascismo negli anni '20*, Foggia : Bastogi, 1981, p. 85)

<sup>147</sup> Lorenzo Montano, 'Lettera agli amici della Ronda', in *Il Perdigiorno* (Bologna : L'Italiano, 1928), cited in 'Politica rondiana', pp. 3900-3901.



### Chapter 3

## TRADITION, MODERNITY AND THE CREATION OF A CULTURAL IDENTITY FOR THE FASCIST REGIME

In his detailed study of the relationship between Futurism and politics Günter Berghaus points out that

[the] combination of revolutionary rhetoric and conservative praxis attracted many influential intellectuals to the regime. It provided them with posts, emoluments, status ; it fanned their self esteem and fostered their delusion that eventually they could win the upper hand over their adversaries (e.g. the Futurists over the Novecentists, the modernists over the traditionalists)<sup>1</sup>

Berghaus presents the creation of a fascist art as a particularly arduous task. If on the one hand intellectuals were invited to give their contribution to the definition of a fascist style, '[h]ow' -on the other hand- 'were the critics to concoct a *stile di duce*, when the leader described it in such vague terms as 'an art that must be traditional and at the same time modern'?'<sup>2</sup>

As a matter of fact, the intellectuals involved in the construction of a cultural identity for the regime not only knew what Mussolini meant by that nebulous statement, but they found themselves (or most of them, at least) rather at ease with the concept of an art which would be traditional and modern at the same time. It was not so much a matter of reconciling apparently opposite terms and concepts, as of redefining them according to the changed political circumstances and the role that



intellectuals envisaged for themselves in the new state, as they were aware of their subordinate status within the regime<sup>3</sup> and they knew that, as Giuseppe Langella argues :

per chi volesse mantenere una posizione “organica” all’interno della dittatura, una funzione riconosciuta premiata e “socialmente utile”, non si dava altra via che quella di mettersi al servizio del partito di regime, alle sue dipendenze, accettando di eseguire le prestazioni che man mano, a seconda dei bisogni del momento, gli fossero richieste, conducendo quell’opera di allestimento ideologico e propagandistico che doveva servire alla manipolazione del consenso.<sup>4</sup>

However, for intellectuals like Ardengo Soffici, Filippo Tommaso Marinetti, Mino Maccari or Massimo Bontempelli the possibility of participating in the creation of the cultural identity of the new state meant more than working towards the construction of consensus in the new regime ; it represented the concretization of the ideological aspirations that these artists shared in the pre-war epoch, which were then transferred to their idiosyncratic interpretations of fascism as an ideology and a political regime.

These aspirations often take the form of cultural projects which attempt to encapsulate at the same time the essence of fascist ideological identity and the spirit of the time. For this reason, the artists and intellectuals involved in these projects appropriate, redefine and interrelate the concepts of tradition and modernity - sometimes in ambiguous or contradictory fashions- in order to preserve their own artistic and cultural identities within which the requirements of the regime are incorporated.

### **Towards the definition of a fascist style : “tradition” and “modernity” in the Debate on Fascist Art (*Critica fascista* 1926-27)**

*...oggi, in cui tutte le condizioni più auspiccate dai grandi italiani... si sono realizzate, può svilupparsi nella nostra terra una grande Arte che comprenda in sè e a sua volta tutte le manifestazioni della vita, un'arte che deve essere tradizionalista e al tempo stesso moderna, che deve guardare al passato e al tempo stesso all'avvenire.*  
(*Critica Fascista*, 15 October 1926)

Bottai decise che l'unico requisito dell'arte “fascista” fosse l'autentica arte italiana.  
Ma in che cosa consisteva l'arte italiana ?  
(Alexander De Grand)

The debate on fascist art, promoted by Giuseppe Bottai and published in the periodical *Critica Fascista* between 1926 and 1927<sup>5</sup>, following the speech delivered by Mussolini at the Academy of Fine Arts in Perugia, gave fascist intellectuals the opportunity to develop the notion of a modern *italianità* and assert their role in the creation of a cultural identity for the regime.

The debate should be contextualized within the political and cultural programme carried out by the periodical *Critica Fascista*, founded by Bottai in June 1923. The task of the periodical is to be a forum of the debate which should be part of the creation of ‘quella classe nuova di dirigenti di cui il fascismo ha bisogno per sostituire l'antica’. According to Bottai, the creation of a new ruling class is ‘il problema centrale del fascismo in questa sua fase di trasformazione: ci piace credere che la seconda ondata abbia a essere finalmente l'avvento [...] degli uomini atti a fare del fascismo il centro sensibile della vita nazionale’.<sup>6</sup>

The aim of Bottai after the rise of fascism is, in fact, to work towards the construction of the fascist state and the creation of a new ruling class ‘che di questo Stato si faccia uno strumento atto a governare nel miglior modo la Nazione’.<sup>7</sup> In

Bottai's view the definition of "the state" should not be interpreted in vague and absolute terms, but as 'volontà si governo', in accordance with which ideas should be transformed into institutions. According to Bottai and his collaborators 'la legislazione rivoluzionaria e i nuovi istituti su cui si basa non sono che i mezzi per arrivare alla più profonda e duratura rivoluzione che è quella delle idee, dei costumi, delle mentalità.'<sup>8</sup> The "revolution" must be "total", not only institutional, and should have a spiritual and moral essence, that goes beyond the fight against bolscevism. Bottai claims 'noi non abbiamo il potere perché abbiamo fatto la rivoluzione [...] ma abbiamo il potere perché dobbiamo fare la rivoluzione.'<sup>9</sup> In this context, culture is seen by Bottai as an important instrument in the construction of the state. For him the idea of culture is closely associated with the notion of "critica", conceived of as an integral part of action and of fundamental importance in the process of acquisition of political awareness.<sup>10</sup> As being strictly connected to action, culture –as *critica*– is not placed in a subordinate position, but is considered 'intelligenza stessa della prassi [...] possibilità di vedere le cose in prospettiva, uscendo dal contingente del locale e dell'irrazionale, unica strada insomma, per procedere oltre la semplice insurrezione ed instaurare, invece, l'autentico edificio "rivoluzionario."<sup>11</sup> As regards Bottai's relationship with art and culture, Alessandro Masi observes that 'la cultura e l'arte [...] significarono per Bottai una seconda terra, una patria nella patria, un simbolo [...] entro cui far interagire i sussulti della nuova civiltà' and that in his view 'l'aspetto culturale non poteva, né doveva essere disgiunto da quello più immediatamente pratico del far politica'.<sup>12</sup>

The periodical *Critica Fascista*, founded in June 1923, aims to be the expression, in Masi's words 'del dibattito e dei fermenti dell'universo storico fascista'.<sup>13</sup> Regarding the importance of the periodical, Masi observes that



*Critica Fascista* fu il primo grande trampolino di lancio attraverso cui Bottai iniziò a inviare i suoi segnali verso il mondo della cultura e dell'arte; il primo luogo di riflessione e di mutamento di una sensibilità intellettuale; e, soprattutto il nucleo germinale in cui importanti e decisive azioni furono pensate, discusse, progettate e varate. *Critica Fascista* può essere considerata, tra le riviste del tempo, quella che maggiormente indagò ed approfondì le tensioni spirituali, le angosce, le ansie e le aspirazioni del popolo fascista.<sup>14</sup>

It is in this context of discussion and debate and within the notion of “culture as action” that Bottai promotes the enquiry on fascist art, ‘inaugurando’ -as Masi points out- ‘per primo tra i politici fascisti, quella fortunata era che portò l’arte e la cultura a misurarsi col potere politico in una prospettiva di collaborazione e di cooperazione che soltanto da lì a qualche anno darà i suoi primi e maturi frutti.’<sup>15</sup>

The importance of the contributors to the enquiry (artists and intellectuals such as Soffici, Pavolini, Maccari, Malaparte, Bontempelli, Marinetti, Bragaglia, Oppo and several others) makes the debate -to use Jeffrey Schnapp and Barbara Spackman’s words- ‘a fundamental landmark’, not only -as they suggest- ‘in the evolution of the regime and its cultural policies’<sup>16</sup>, but also in the process of defining how possible was an aesthetics of fascism. The positions that emerge from the enquiry are only apparently reconciled. Although the unifying factor in the debate is the notion of a lost *italianità* to be recovered in art, this concept is nonetheless interpreted in different ways, since for the intellectuals involved in the debate *italianismo* is closely connected to the notion of cultural and intellectual identity, which is not only to be defined against the “threat” posed by the intrusion of foreign culture into what is perceived as Italian culture, but also -within the regime- against internal regimentation.

Most participants in the debate elaborate a definition for the notion of *italianità* by equating it with that of *classicità*, and oppose the concept of “classical” to a notion of “neo-classicism” as academicism, perceived as a threat to the possibility of developing an original and modern national style. The other notion to which they oppose their version of classical art is that of romantic art, interpreted as a barbaric, decadent, ultimately bourgeois art, whose importation from Northern Europe has corrupted the traditional spirit of Italian art. What they offer as a counterpart is a reconstructed concept of classical art, related to a redefined notion of Italian modernity. The notion of “classical” as it emerges from the debate is to some extent trans-historical and it constitutes a useful category in what could be called an aesthetic-political reconstruction of time. The perceived value of such a notion can be summarized in the concepts of “preservation” and “transmission”, that is the preservation and transmission of the essence of *italianità* in its political and artistic achievements. The identification of *classicità* with *italianità* and the concept of an Italian modernity based on the rediscovery of the essence of “italianness” through the redefinition of its artistic tradition are not new in the post-war period (the theorization carried out by such periodicals as *Valori Plastici* and *La Ronda* is an example of this type of cultural operation) ; however, it is in these years that such concepts begin to acquire a highly politicized value. The concept of *classicità* is therefore linked on the one hand to the notion of tradition and on the other is intertwined with a more populist notion of classical as “classic”, which allows a more flexible and comprehensive discourse, so that, for instance, in his contribution to the debate Alessandro Pavolini can talk of the fourteenth, fifteenth and sixteenth centuries as of the ‘grandi classici secoli dell’arte italiana’ and at the same time define the classical in terms of the interrelation between power, art and the people.<sup>17</sup>

In his contribution to the debate Ardengo Soffici presents his version of a new classicism based on a mixture of tradition and modernity, which, in his terms, has always been the essence of Italian art :

Credo che la letteratura e l'arte che il Fascismo può e anzi deve patrocinare siano quelle le quali, perché più partecipano della sua essenza spirituale, meno si prestano ad una definizione semplicistica, e l'eccellenza dei cui caratteri meno apparisce nella confusione presente di tutto. E' la letteratura, è l'arte che non può dirsi nè reazionaria nè rivoluzionaria perché riunisce in sé l'esperienza del passato e la promessa dell'avvenire ; è la letteratura, è l'arte dell'equilibrio e della probità ; è la letteratura e l'arte che si può insieme denominare materialistica e idealistica perché la materia e lo spirito vi hanno la loro parte quali termini imprescindibili di vita ; che, nè nuova, nè tradizionalistica, nè romantica, nè classica, nè pesante, nè leggera, nè culturale, nè tutta istintiva, contempera in sé gli estremi di ogni esperienza, e tende così alla sincera espressione dell'anima del creatore, cioè allo stile e alla perfezione.<sup>18</sup>

He identifies a series of dichotomies, such as tradition versus modernity, classicism versus romanticism, culture versus instinct, which he then synthesises into a form of realism, 'intendendo questa parola nel senso che può avere quando si applica alla poesia di Alceo, di Saffo, o alla scultura di Fidia e di Prassitele'<sup>19</sup>. Soffici's notion of synthetic realism as an art which combines the representation of reality with "the author's lyrical spirit and stylistic will"<sup>20</sup> is presented as a polemical counterpart to the art 'di tutte le scuole decadenti, di origine idealistico-romantica, dal cubismo al dadaismo, attraverso il classicismo ed il futurismo.'<sup>21</sup>

Soffici's definition of synthetic realism is the culmination of a process of aesthetic self-redefinition which starts as early as 1915, when Papini, with whom he co-edits *Lacerba*, writes the article *Futurismo e Marinettismo*, where he appropriates and redefines the theoretical stance of the futurist movement, stressing the difference



between Futurism and ‘Marinettismo’ precisely in terms of their different relationship with the past and literary tradition. Later on, in his *Primi Principi di un’Estetica Futurista*, published in complete form in 1920 but written between 1914 and 1917, Soffici insists on the necessity for the artist of basing his modernity on an originality acquired through ‘the assimilation, absorption, then necessary negation of all preceding aesthetic values.’<sup>22</sup> His concept of “classical modernity” is one of a modernity which is mediated through constant dialogue with the past : the return to the past represents, to an artist like Soffici, the final stage of the tormented age of transition to which he belongs. His notion of *classicità* represents therefore, almost paradoxically, a measure of modernity : it is a concept to be retrieved and redefined both within tradition and also -as “classical modernity”- as the new Italian project, presented as carrier of order against the “corrupt” modernity of liberal, bourgeois or communist progressivism.<sup>23</sup>

The same use of the notion of classical as a specific feature of Italian tradition is present in Alessandro Pavolini’s contribution to the debate. Despite being very young at the time of the debate (he had been born in 1903), Pavolini was considered a fascist of the “old guard”, because of his intense activity as a *squadrista* and his direct involvement in the March on Rome. During the early 1920s he had already been part of the board of directors of the GUF (*Gruppo degli universitari fascisti*) and provincial delegate of the ONB (*Opera nazionale balilla*). At the time of the debate he was a reputed journalist, writer and intellectual (his first book, *Giro d’Italia*, was published the year after his contribution to the debate, in 1927), and a regular at the café *Giubbe Rosse* – the famous meeting point of the Florentine intellectuals.

Pavolini reads fascism as a time of political and consequently artistic renaissance ; his reading of the “classical” centuries in Italian art establishes a constant relationship between artists and people :

Nel trecento, nel Quattrocento, nel Cinquecento, nei grandi classici secoli dell’arte italiana, non campeggiavano soltanto... grandi figure d’artefici, e, accanto a loro, grandi opere d’arte, profili indimenticabili, fermati sulla tela o nel marmo, di ispiratrici terrestri e celesti, di signori umani e divini, di eroi popolari e mitici. Ai piedi degli artefici e dei capolavori, un personaggio corale s’aggiunge immancabile, che è il popolo. [...] Al popolo [...] il riferimento [...] era, da parte dell’artista, necessario, assiduo, umile, amoroso.<sup>24</sup>

The appropriation by the Italian artists of the romantic North-European tradition<sup>25</sup> led to estrangement from the national tradition, and, as a consequence, to the decadence of Italian art, as the Italian tradition is not only one of connection to the people, but also a source of healthy originality (‘L’originalità d’ogni artista partiva naturalmente dalla tradizione come l’albero fruttifero parte dalla terra.’<sup>26</sup>) The “classical” is once again opposed to the “romantic” as Mediterranean civilization against barbarism. Alienation from the classical tradition has also led to estrangement from popular art, since classical art has always been, in Pavolini’s terms, popular by definition. Artists have lost, together with contact with the people, also their function within society :

Nello stato moderno, democratico e liberale, l’artista romantico ha la sua posizione più adatta : ossia non ne ha alcuna. Ogni simpatia verso la politica, verso la vita nazionale gli viene ostacolata. Ha tutto l’isolamento, il disprezzo e la miseria che gli occorrono.<sup>27</sup>

Tradition is reconsidered in terms of a reinterpretation of the interconnection between the aesthetic and the political : not only does the notion of “classical” belong

exclusively to the Italian tradition as opposed to the North-European one, but it is also defined as both linked to the people and subordinate to the state, and it creates the conditions for the artist to have a mediatory role between power and people.

As Pavolini's notion of *classicità* is defined as a moment of interaction between power, artist and people, it has a historical character ; however, the constant possibility for a classical period to occur in history makes it acquire a trans-historical value : Pavolini's *classicità* encompasses, therefore, fourteenth, fifteenth and sixteenth century, Giotto, Michelangelo, Ghiberti, Vasari, Brunelleschi, Donatello and Jacopo della Quercia. He identifies three elements which contributed to the possibility of returning to a situation of *classicità*, where the artist can function as a mediator within society : Futurism, the war and fascism.

Futurism is defined on the one hand as 'l'estremità terminale della nostra decadenza' and a kind of art where 'la scissione romantica tra il popolo e gli artisti [...] raggiunge profondità abissali' ; on the other hand it is seen as the first movement to ask for the response of the masses and to be concerned about making art an important element of people's life. Futurism is therefore re-read as the last bulwark of Romanticism and, at the same time, as containing elements of the Italian tradition of connection with the people which make its art belong to *classicità*.

If the intertwined notions of "Italian" and "classical" are used by Pavolini to stress the presence in Italian history of art of an element of subordination of art to state, the opposite concept is found in Mino Maccari and Anton Giulio Bragaglia's contributions to the debate, where the definition of Italian artistic tradition is used as a defence against artistic regimentation. In his article Maccari claims that



un'arte fascista, come “scuola”, o “tendenza”, o “nucleo di canoni”, non esisterà mai e se esistesse non sarebbe che un trucco bestiale ma dovrà esistere un'arte che sarà fascista in quanto interprete altissima del rinnovamento italiano, cioè in quanto onesta, sana, sincera, intimamente e inconfondibilmente *italiana*.<sup>28</sup>

Maccari's position is against the superimposition of abstract rules on the artists : the characteristics of fascist art are to be found in the work of artists. As the representative in the debate of the *selvaggi* -the unruly core of provincial fascism- his contribution is a reaction against the threat represented by the attempt to regiment art and at the same time an attempt to reinforce the role of the intellectuals in the creation of the new state.

Bragaglia identifies the core of the Italian artistic character as a tradition of dignity given to art that the epoch inaugurated by the new regime should preserve. His contribution to the debate is meant to reinstate and reinforce the social and political importance of the artist, whose role is to create the style which defines a specific period. Bragaglia's contention is that the artist has a fundamental role in constructing the identity of an epoch. In the fascist era the artists' task is to construct a national modernity, which would be truly modern and not a reproduction or a readaptation of past styles. Bragaglia's modernity is constructed through the rejection of all the “neo” styles, which represent lack of conceptual and artistic originality, so as to stress not only the importance of the artist in the creation and the definition of original modernity, but also how fascism must be the expression of a “modern” time. He states that the style is the epoch (*Lo stile è l'epoca* is the title of Bragaglia's article) : the style is the expression of the epoch which produces it and, at the same time, it defines the epoch. A truly modern epoch must have, therefore, a modern style :

Tutto ciò che è rimasticamento di stili storici, non figureranno attività di questi tempi ; non è opera, infatti, di gente contemporanea a noi. [...] Tutto ciò che vien prodotto in stili neo-classici o neo-vari che siano, va dunque distribuito nella classifica storica delle epoche diverse e i bastardi vanno dilaniati in più epoche. Il patrono delle opere resterà comunque il patrono della fondazione di quel determinato stile. Questo è che vale. La rivoluzione, secondo noi, doveva assicurarsi l'assunzione di uno stile proprio nelle Arti. Questo era il sigillo ! Capirolo si doveva subito e non già attaccarsi alle cialtronerie antiquarie col copiatuccio storicomane.<sup>29</sup>

Bragaglia acknowledges that futurist art no longer represents the style of the epoch ('uno stile *dei nostri tempi*'), but it, at least, still expresses an Italian quest for modernity, against the plagiarism and parasitism that constitute neo-classicism. He insists on the possibility for Italian art to be modern and at the same time to retain its national character : 'Mi pare legittimo essere moderni anziché neo-antichi quando in ogni caso si resta italiani.'<sup>30</sup> Neo-classicism is seen as "plagiarism moralized by history", as art draws blindly on the past as a source of identity, without understanding and accepting the artistic potentiality of the present.

Curzio Malaparte too rejects the possibility of a fascist art defined as such :

Tu mi domandi, caro Bottai, la mia opinione sulla possibilità e la necessità di un'arte fascista, di un'arte nuova che sia il segno più eccellente dei tempi nuovi. Ecco : se una tale domanda mi fosse fatta di notte, in una strada senza fanali, da qualcuno che non conosco, ti assicuro che mi farei giustizia da me medesimo a bastonate e a cazzotti nel muso. O che scherziamo ? un'arte fascista ? o che vuol dire *arte fascista* ?<sup>31</sup>

According to him fascist art should not be conceived as state art, as Mussolini himself did not mention the necessity of creating an official party regime art, but 'un'arte nuova che sia il segno più eccellente dei tempi nuovi'. Malaparte sees fascist art as only definable in terms of *italianità* : fascist art should express the essence of

Italian art. He describes Italian art as ‘piuttosto volgare (nel giusto senso) *quam* accademica, bècera, all’occorrenza, *quam* parruccona, paesana e provinciale *quam* barbogia’<sup>32</sup>. He defines this art as traditional and “classical”, as an art which has its roots ‘nella nostra vera, classica, italianissima tradizione’, therefore he presents an unorthodox version of the “classical”, to which he applies the values of anti-academicism and ruralism, promoted in those years by such fascist movements as *Strapaese*, as will be seen later on in this chapter.

Similarly, Cipriano Efisio Oppo rejects the notion of fascist art as of state art, but his position is more ambiguous than Maccari’s or Malaparte’s : he too insists on the identification of “fascist” with “Italian” and calls for the creation of a classic art as once again the expression of *italianità*. He states that ‘in Italia non vi può esservi nuovo classicismo semplicemente perché non ve n’è mai stato uno vecchio ; in Italia o si diventa classici o nulla, così come non potrebbe esserci un neobarbarismo, che è invece naturale e logico ad altri popoli.’<sup>33</sup> However, his artistic canon is revisited in terms of an Italian tradition of discipline and order, ‘disciplina volontaria e [...] obbedienza non passiva.’<sup>34</sup> This tradition of implied voluntary subordination includes Giotto, Dante, Masaccio, Jacopo della Quercia, Leon Battista Alberti, Brunelleschi, Michelangelo, Raffaello, Giorgione, Titian, Ariosto, Caravaggio, Palestrina, Rossini, Manzoni, Leopardi and Verdi. Rather than a rewriting of the classical canon, this concoction of rather disparate artists and periods seems aimed at a redefinition of the notion of the classical according to political criteria which are not explained for every individual artists but are grouped under the description of these artists as ‘rivoluzionari e tradizionalisti nel medesimo tempo, nuovi e antichi insieme com’è la bella contraddizione consentita della storia dell’arte italiana.’<sup>35</sup>



Massimo Bontempelli expresses his controversial relationship with tradition by participating in the development of the notion of fascist epoch as palingenesis. In his contribution to the enquiry he presents Fascism as one of the great epochs of humanity, coming after the classical epoch (from Homer to Christ) and the romantic epoch (from Christ to the “European War”). Fascism would be the beginning of the third epoch of human civilization. Having overcome the previous epochs, the art of the new era must define itself through the negation of the previous ones : ‘Certo, qualche negazione dobbiamo imporci : negare tutto quanto, nell’arte che ancora ci circonda, è, non già gloriosa eredità, ma sterile e stanco avanzo del secolo che ci ha preceduti.’<sup>36</sup> Instead of defining fascist art in terms of a reappropriated Italian tradition, Bontempelli advocates the creation of a completely new art which would be the expression of the new epoch. The new art should be ‘divertente, anche quando avrà le sue radici nel dolore ; rivestire di sorriso le cose più tristi e di stupore le cose più banali ; essere un miracolo invece che un tedio, un atto di magia invece che il disbrigo di una pratica d’ufficio ; ritrovare il senso del mistero e l’equilibrio tra il cielo e la terra’<sup>37</sup> : a synthesis, in effect, of the programme of the periodical *900*, of which Bontempelli is the editor.

Despite Bontempelli’s quest for absolute originality and novelty, his programme for a new art soon becomes an object of controversy : one of the contributors to the debate, Fausto Maria Martini, accuses Bontempelli of repeating Pascoli’s aesthetic theories (*fanciullino*). He points out that, as a matter of fact, Bontempelli’s self-proclaimed originality is nothing but ‘vecchi paradisi artificiali, ancora quei vecchi paradisi artificiali un tempo di moda, che credevamo di aver lasciati per sempre nelle sale dei caffè e nei sotterranei degli alberghi di lusso quando partimmo per la guerra.’<sup>38</sup>

As far as the futurists are concerned, by 1926 they had renounced any attempt to change the political status quo and they had turned their attention exclusively to artistic matters. As Günter Berghaus points out,

in the second half of the 1920s, the Futurists tried their utmost to keep the spirit of 1919 alive in the Fascist State. Their aim was to complement “the change of régime with an artistic revolution, to link the great social change to a spiritual or aesthetic reality.” No longer willing or allowed to be politicians, they wanted at least to produce a revolutionary, an intransigent Fascist art, different from the régime’s “official art, which is not a Fascist art, because it was fostered by cultural bureaucrats who were nothing but “anti-Fascists camouflaged as Fascists”.<sup>39</sup>

This attitude is particularly evident in Marinetti’s contribution to the debate, where he accuses Croce and his followers of being *esteroфи* and he proclaims Futurism to be the true modern Italian style, since it is in tune with ‘[il] temperamento tipicamente improvvisatore e anticulturale anticrociano e antivociano di Benito Mussolini.’<sup>40</sup>

The other futurist contributor to the debate, Volt<sup>41</sup>, stresses the importance of Futurism in the development of a notion of art that rejects the autonomy of artistic genres like painting and sculpture. Volt claims that architecture is ‘l’arte madre di tutte le arti plastiche e figurative’<sup>42</sup>, since in past civilizations painting and sculpture were not conceived as autonomous, but as a decorative complement to buildings. The emancipation of painting and sculpture from architecture happens when the latter goes through a stage of decadence. However such independence can only create a situation whereby art has no real function and the artist ‘prescinde[...] totalmente dal luogo ove il quadro e la statua debbono figurare, lavorando solo per le Esposizioni.’<sup>43</sup>

The creation of art for art’s sake leads to the artists’ confusion : they do not know what their purpose is when painting or sculpting. This does not prevent the creation

of masterpieces, but they become rare. Volt claims that Impressionism is the last school that produced great works of art. After Impressionism chaos reigned in the world of visual arts. Futurism is a reaction against post-impressionist chaos: ‘il futurismo reagisce contro la pittura e la scultura post-impressionista, reagisce contro la stessa pittura e la stessa scultura, considerate come arti autonome. *Il futurismo è essenzialmente anti-pittorico e anti-scultoreo.*’<sup>44</sup> As a matter of fact, it represents the *Latin* reaction to northern decadence (‘il buon senso latino’) and it retrieves a concept of art which has a purpose and is integrated (presumably socially) and which is seen as the essence of *latinità*.

After publishing all the contributions, Bottai writes an article evaluating the enquiry (*Resultanze dell’inchiesta sull’arte fascista*)<sup>45</sup> where he attempts to draw some conclusions from the debate. He acknowledges that the enquiry did not have the purpose of defining the characteristics of a “pure fascist art” and deplores the participants’ vagueness and lack of political maturity in not recognising that the problem of fascist art does not need any further theoretical discussion but concrete artistic achievements ; nonetheless, as a result of the debate, it is possible to outline an artistic (as well as political) tendency towards a return to tradition and order that allows a definition of what fascist art should *not* be. According to such a tendency art

non deve essere [...] frammentaria, sincopata, psicoanalistica, intimista, crepuscolare, ecc. perché tutte queste forme artistiche non sono se non malattie dell’arte, ribellioni clinico-estetizzanti alla grande tradizione artistica italiana, che oggi riappare in tutta la sua grandezza, nonostante che -prima e durante le suddette malattie- Raffaello fosse definito un colorista superficiale, Verdi un tamburrino e Foscolo un retore.<sup>46</sup>

The various contributions to the debate also suggest that, although having played an important role in the construction of a modern identity for Italian art,



Futurism has exhausted its possibilities as a representative of Italian modernity. The intellectuals' attitudes towards Futurism throughout the debate vary. Soffici, for instance, rejects futurist iconoclasm in the name of a modern *classicità*; Bragaglia acknowledges the importance of Futurism in the creation of Italian modernity - although it has now been superseded by a conception of modernity which is more linked to tradition; Pavolini, on the other hand, sees Futurism as a bridge between Romanticism and the epoch born with the new regime; Bontempelli, although not showing it clearly, implies his polemical position towards Futurism, as his contribution to the debate is a repetition of the 900 programme.<sup>47</sup> Bottai himself had had his confrontation with Futurism at the beginning of the Twenties, when he felt that the futurist epoch was coming to an end and, responding to the general "call for order" both in politics and culture, he had advocated a return to tradition.<sup>48</sup>

The necessity of a constant confrontation with Futurism on the part of the intellectuals in the 1920s implies that, by then, every redefinition of modernity cannot but relate to futurist theorization. This means that whether these intellectuals are aware of it or not, Futurism has by now become part of a "tradition" which every redefinition of modernity has to confront.

Schnapp and Spackman notice that the most significant aspect of the debate is

the way in which it crystallizes a number of fundamental paradoxes which fascism was never fully able to resolve. Even within the confines of a single contribution, one finds recurring tensions between themes of revolutionary activism and institutional conservatism, between the celebration of heroic individualism and corporate conformity, between elitist and populist values, between appeals for continuity and rupture, between organic and mechanical metaphors.<sup>49</sup>

If it is true that such contradictions reflect the paradoxes that characterize the construction of fascist ideology, and if it is true that from this debate fascism emerges as ‘an unstable and deeply paradoxical ideological formation held together with an often slippery aesthetic glue’<sup>50</sup>, it is also true that the American scholars’ conclusion does not seem to take into account that the debate brings to light a series of problems and positions in the aesthetic field which to a certain extent existed before the rise of fascism and the involvement of artists and intellectuals in the cultural policies of the regime. The issues regarding the redefinition of such central concepts as “tradition”, “modernity”, “*classicità*” and “*italianità*” were objects of debate in the immediate post-war years as a result of the post-avant-garde climate. The possibility of Italian intellectuals realizing their aspiration to a more “organic” function leads them to reread problematic aesthetic concepts in a highly politicised fashion, precisely because of the intrinsically political potential they contain. It could be said that in an atmosphere of ideological fluidity, which is that of the first years of the fascist regime, the debate on fascist art, far from defining what fascist art is or could be, is a significant, highly politicized synthesis of the various positions achieved in the aesthetic field in Italy, as a result of over twenty years of intense cultural debate.

## Two cultural utopias for the regime: *Strapaese* and *Stracittà*

Dal '26 al '28 gli intellettuali militanti del fascismo si troveranno  
impegnati nello sforzo prioritario di mettere a punto una carta organica e completa  
dell'identità culturale del nuovo regime.  
(G. Langella)

The two movements of *Strapaese* and *Stracittà* -centred mainly around the periodicals *Il Selvaggio* and *900-* are both involved in the project of the creation of a cultural identity for the new regime, which they openly support; they represent two coexisting and complementary aspects of the Italian culture of the period -provincial ruralism and cosmopolitan urbanism- together with the aspirations towards cultural hegemony of, on the one hand the provinces, and, on the other, urban bourgeoisie. These two movements, however, do not succeed, either in dominating the cultural scene of the period, or in presenting themselves as cohesive cultural projects, as they both reveal internal contradictions which make them ideologically unclear. After all, both projects present the same characteristics of political and cultural syncretism and the same "oxymoronic"<sup>51</sup> tendencies which constitute fascist ideology. Therefore, such movements as *Strapaese* and *Stracittà* are only apparently each other's opposite. Giuseppe Langella notices how the goals of the two movements are, as a matter of fact, the same; what differ are "le fattezze del costume" and these will make their positions irreconcilable.<sup>52</sup> He also points out that '*Strapaese e Stracittà* [...] non si potrebbero capire al di fuori del quadro contrassegnato dall'ambiguità sostanziale del fronte dei consensi e dal tentativo di distillare dalla babilonica confusione un'identità culturale puramente e perfettamente fascista.'<sup>53</sup>



## *Il Selvaggio* and the *Strapaese* project

*Strapaese* è una soluzione *italiana* dell'esigenza della vita moderna  
(*Il Selvaggio*, 15 December 1927)

In 1926 *Il Selvaggio*'s editorial office moves from Colle Val D'Elsa, where the periodical was born in 1924, to Florence, and Mino Maccari becomes the editor of the journal, replacing the winemaker and fascist *ras* Angiolo Bencini.<sup>54</sup> The move coincides with the end of *Il Selvaggio*'s support for provincial *squadrismo*, marked by a significant article by Maccari entitled *Addio del Passato*<sup>55</sup>, where *Il Selvaggio* abandons its direct involvement in political activities, as 'non è permesso a chiunque fare della politica'. With fascism solidly in power, in fact, politics has become a matter 'di governo, non di partito'. The move also coincides with the end of the first period of *Il Selvaggio*. The periodical was born, after the Matteotti murder, as a mainly political paper, with the aim of defending the initial revolutionary drive of the provincial *squadre* against the extensive "normalization" undergone by the fascist party. As reported by Luisa Mangoni<sup>56</sup>, in September 1925 Angiolo Bencini still invokes the use of violence in politics, but in October the *squadre* are broken up, and so are the *tribù* – local subdivisions of the *selvaggi* movement. The only way to continue the revolution seems to be through culture. This new awareness is expressed by Sugo di Bosco in an article published in December 1925:

gli squadristi, specie quelli più inviperiti [...] non attraversano, in questi giorni, un periodo troppo soddisfacente per loro. E poiché sono giovani, impolitici, insofferenti, volitivi e irriflessivi, si trovano talvolta "fuori del seminato". Così il fascista scansafatiche, il fascista per opportunità, colui che sta alla finestra [...] passa per il fascista modello, esempio di disciplina e obbedienza, mentre lo squadrista che al fascismo offre quotidianamente la propria giovinezza e la propria vita, tutto ardente

dalla passione rivoluzionaria, si vede considerato come un ribelle impiccioso, come un peso, un ostacolo, un danno. Porco mondo! Come rimediare? Possibile che proprio il fiore della gioventù fascista si debba far mettere nel sacco?

Non c'è, o amici, che un segreto: l'*intelligenza*.<sup>57</sup>

The group of *Il Selvaggio*, headed by Maccari, decides therefore to turn to culture. As 'there is nothing but art'<sup>58</sup>, the provincial *Selvaggio* will, therefore, die and, like the phoenix, will rise from the ashes and devote itself exclusively to the cultivation of art, which Maccari politically defines as 'espressione suprema dell'intelligenza d'una stirpe'. In this context, the turn to artistic matters operated by *Il Selvaggio* retains a political value and an element of engagement, as, in Maccari's words 'una rivoluzione è anzitutto e soprattutto un atteggiamento e un orientamento dell'intelligenza. Dunque dalla produzione artistica noi avremo l'indice del valore d'una rivoluzione.'<sup>59</sup> The turn to art is therefore politically and morally justified. As artistic production reflects the value of a revolution, what Maccari proceeds to do is to define the fascist revolution in artistic terms, and, at the same time, present an artistic model identifiable as "revolutionary". The *selvaggi* consider the presence of Ardengo Soffici as an important contributor to the periodical as evidence of a link connecting at the same time their project with the pre-war Florentine culture and that culture with fascism:

Possiamo anche rammentare il singolare movimento che, più di dieci anni or sono, aveva il suo fulcro nei gruppi di artisti del *Leonardo*, della *Voce* e della indimenticabile *Lacerba*. E' doveroso però riconoscere che, nel caso nostro, a questi paragoni, si tratta d'un embrione, d'un accenno, ma abbastanza promettenti: più *politici*, ad ogni modo, più completamente rivoluzionari. Il fatto che Ardengo Soffici, la cui influenza sulle attuali generazioni –fasciste– è inutile rilevare, ci voglia bene e ci riceva nel suo Poggio a Caiano, patria del primo fascista, *Lemmonio Boreo*, ha un significato decisivo.<sup>60</sup>

The *Selvaggio* project is based on the redefinition of the notion of “Italian” artistic tradition and modernity as polemically opposed to modernist tendencies, whose values are materialized -according to Maccari's group- in the image of the city. After all, since *Il Selvaggio* was born as the expression of the intransigence of provincial fascism against *normalizzazione*<sup>61</sup>, urban culture had always been identified as the *selvaggi*'s principal enemy both at a political and, more generally, cultural level. In this respect, Luisa Mangoni interestingly observes that the polemic between the provincial side of fascism –represented, for instance, by Soffici- and its urban side, more inclined towards *normalizzazione* (represented by Bottai), becomes a fundamental point of reference for various forms of cultural organization in the 1920s.<sup>62</sup> In this sense, according to the scholar, Bottai's background as *ardito* is very significant in the development of his political ideas and partially explains his detachment from and incompatibility with the stance of rural fascism. Bottai himself comments:

fu tra gli “arditi”, fenomeno guerresco più cittadino che rurale, più operaio che contadino, epperiò più sensibile e aperto alle ripercussioni della lotta politica sullo stato d'animo dei combattenti, che cominciai a staccarmi dalle pagine dei miei libri preferiti di poesia, d'arte, di critica, di vicende filosofiche [...] Numerosi erano, in quelle formazioni di volontari del rischio, gli uomini provenienti da partiti estremi o da estreme posizioni di pensiero.<sup>63</sup>

However, despite their critique of urban modernity, the *selvaggi*'s aim is not to reject modernity, but as Adamson points out, to ‘redefine it radically’<sup>64</sup> according to reconstructed principles of national cultural identity:

Noi non rifiutiamo la vita moderna : la vogliamo dominare, la vogliamo dirigere, creare noi stessi, col nostro gusto italiano, autentico, ricco di secolari esperienze, fedele al sangue e alla razza - *selvaggio*, insomma.



Vogliamo andare a Parigi, a Londra, a Berlino, a Nuova York non da conquistati ; ma da conquistatori. Non a portar laggiù le brutte copie della civiltà altrui ; ma gli odorosi, fragranti, sani, gustosi frutti della civiltà italiana.<sup>65</sup>

The utopian centre of the *selvaggi's* artistic revolution is *Strapaese*, the fictional “hyper-village” born in the pages of *Il Selvaggio* in July 1926.<sup>66</sup> *Strapaese* claims for itself the task of representing the voice of cultural “italianism” against the invasion of foreign tendencies; the *selvaggi's* aim is therefore to redefine aesthetic principles according to their project of reconstruction of artistic *italianità* as a possibility for a new cultural model. Since by 1926 the concept of “Italian” is equated to “fascist”, one of the *selvaggi's* aims is also to become the official artistic movement of the new regime.<sup>67</sup> The aim of the *Strapaese* project is stated from the start :

siccome bisogna disperdere le confusioni in fatto d’arte come si sono disperse e si vanno disperdendo in fatto di politica [...] così abbiamo deciso di far da noi, di fondare un paese ideale, di opporre ai falsi valori valori reali, di lottare con la massima energia per ottenere la vittoria che vogliamo. E nella lotta occorre anche forzare il tono : peccare di violenza piuttosto che di debolezza. Lo scopo -per noi- è buono. Machiavelli è con noi. E giù botte !<sup>68</sup>

As these intellectuals claim for themselves a specific role in the creation of the new state (‘Duplice è il compito nostro : tendere con tutta la volontà allo ‘stato’<sup>69</sup>), the creation of a new art becomes a political issue :

*Strapaese* proclama da anni la necessità di difendere il carattere rurale della vita italiana dalle importazioni di civiltà straniere che tendono a distruggerlo. Questo è un principio politico, non una ricetta letteraria. Andate a un mercato qualunque dei vostri paesi : vedrete gente robusta, abbronzata e fiera, attivissima e piena d’ingegno. così è la base di un impero. Andate in un tabarin : ci troverete dei giovani che a trent’anni n’hanno sessanta.<sup>70</sup>

As soon as *Strapaese* is created, it is polemically opposed by the *selvaggi* to a fictional place, the town of Rattaglia, called after the poet Federico Valerio Ratti and defined as ‘una città [...] tutta in cemento armato, con archi di trionfo in cartapeccora, vittorie alate, e Brasini la disegnerà, con l’aiuto di Piacentini...’

### In Rattaglia

[i] pittori non possono dipingere su superfici inferiori a dieci metri di lunghezza per cinque di altezza ; i poeti hanno il titolo di vati e il compito di cantare in versi sonori drammi e tragedie con intervento di Agrippina, suicidio di Lucrezia e concione di Caio Gracco.

A Rattaglia non c’è casa nè fonte nè strada nè marciapiede nè facciata nè monumento che non riproducano con scrupolosa esattezza, perfino nei graffi e nelle rotture, pregevoli opere d’arte...<sup>71</sup>

Rattaglia represents the “plagiarism moralised by history” deprecated by Anton Giulio Bragaglia in his contribution to the 1926-27 *Critica Fascista* debate on fascist art<sup>72</sup>; it is also conceived of as the triumph of the "neo" styles, the ‘copiatissimo storicomane’<sup>73</sup> that prevents fascism from having an original style. The polemic against this utopian town, which, in many respects, is the precursor of *Stracittà*, is carried out only in two issues of *Il Selvaggio*<sup>74</sup> and has the function of creating a counterpart against which the *Strapaese* project is defined and its values are promoted. Rattaglia represents the “other side” of culture, the plagiarism and misinterpretation of the Italian artistic character and tradition and the “corrupted” and manneristic version of modernity to which the *selvaggi* juxtapose their "healthy" and fundamentally classical version of the modern. *Strapaese* is therefore the *locus* where the real Italian tradition is retrieved and modernity is recreated.

The *selvaggi's* redefinition of modernity also implies a strict interrelation between art and politics, which involves a constant dialogue with a literary past (what they call 'l'italianissima tradizione') re-read in terms of political commitment ; the artists who intend to be part of that tradition cannot be confined to their ivory tower :

Gli artisti che fanno capo al *Selvaggio* intendono di proseguire l'italianissima tradizione per la quale essi hanno sempre fatto parte integrante della vita politica rappresentando anzi la quintessenza dell'italianità.

Italia prima che industria, agricoltura, commercio, significa spirito e gli artisti sono i sacerdoti dello spirito. Quel che essi pensano e affermano ha valore di voce schietta della razza e quindi funzione di prim'ordine nella vita politica italiana. Soltanto in un regime demoliberale o socialistico, e quindi improprio all'italianità, gli artisti erano assenti dalla vita pubblica.<sup>75</sup>

Such a notion of tradition implies the recovery of the idea of "civic literature" which the new regime should promote and which would restore the artists' lost social function. Italian literary tradition undergoes, therefore, a process of revision, in terms of political commitment. A special place in the canon rewritten by the *selvaggi* is devoted to Dante, politically re-read as 'il poeta dell'impero'<sup>76</sup>, the poet of action, who cannot betray 'il santo vero' and for the love of it accepts exile and isolation, whose poetry is "being" rather than "saying", but, above all, who is faithful to 'l'idea imperiale'. In his article on Dante, Giacinto Agnoletti juxtaposes the figures of Caesar and Cato in Dante's *Inferno* and *Purgatorio* : although both are deprived of Christianity's eternal reward, Caesar is placed by Dante in Limbo, whereas Cato is Purgatory's guardian. Caesar is the founder of the empire, Cato its greatest opponent. Nonetheless, Cato is saved, as Caesar never showed any of the virtues of faith, hope, charity and magnanimity which allow a soul to escape damnation. In Agnoletti's words



ponendolo a guardia dei sacri approdi, dopo aver lasciato Cesare sospeso nel folto dei vani sospiri, il poeta fedele dell'idea imperiale afferma che l'impero voluto da Dio non è quello cesareo, deve essere quello romano. Che nello stato romano consacra l'esempio romano e la libertà umana, ad attestare e obbedire l'ordine divino.<sup>77</sup>

Dante's condemnation of Caesar is for Agnoletti the expression of his faith in an idea of the empire as divine will and therefore renunciation of individuality for a superior collective purpose.

The other poet appropriated by the *selvaggi* is Leopardi, as the "poet of tradition". In 1928 they write:

Siamo [...] sbalorditi di leggere sul *Raduno* che Salgari sarebbe un "martoriato educatore della nostra gioventù" e un precursore del fascismo : e lo sbalordimento si muta in nausea e disgusto quando in quel giornale "degli artisti di tutte le arti" troviamo, buttata giù di straforo, una frase simile :

*"Io affermo che nel bilancio storico dell'Italia, della nuova Italia, Emilio Salgari conta molto più che Giacomo Leopardi."*

[...] Inconsciamente, l'autore di quella triste frase, ha posto un problema essenziale. Insomma, l'Italia del Fascismo è nata da Salgari o da Leopardi ?<sup>78</sup>

The *selvaggi* propose an Italian "classical" canon formed by Dante, Petrarch, Ariosto and Leopardi, as opposed to a bourgeois counter-canon, composed of such writers as Carducci, D'Annunzio and Da Verona<sup>79</sup>. Classical tradition is therefore opposed to bourgeois culture. Bourgeois is read as anti-classical, and for this reason bourgeois contemporary society is no longer able to understand the great Italian tradition. The notion of classical tradition is therefore appropriated by the *selvaggi* in anti-bourgeois terms : it is precisely because it is read as carrying anti-bourgeois values (Dante, for instance, is re-read as the promoter of an idea of empire as supraindividual entity) that the *selvaggi* can propose themselves as part of that

classical tradition (whereas the *Stracittà* artists are seen as continuers of the bourgeois tradition started in the last decades of the previous century). The *selvaggi*, therefore, present themselves as belonging to an older tradition, by them opposed to a new tradition created by bourgeois society, which, because it is deliberately not rooted in the past, is alien to the true Italian artistic character.

The version of "modernity" the *selvaggi* propose is polemically opposed to "modernism"<sup>80</sup> as a cultural and artistic tendency: their modernity defines and defends the features of *italianità* and springs from a tradition, which is read as anti-bourgeois and therefore as rural<sup>81</sup>:

*Strapaese* è stato fatto apposta per difendere a spada tratta il carattere rurale e paesano della gente italiana, vale a dire, oltrech  l'espressione pi  genuina e schietta della razza, l'ambiente, il clima, la mentalit  dove son custodite, per istinto e per amore, le pi  pure tradizioni nostre.<sup>82</sup>

The *selvaggi's* alternative version of modernity as opposed to modernism leads them to a series of ferocious attacks against one of the major (if not the major) exponents of Italian literary modernism, Luigi Pirandello, who represents to their eyes the epitome of anti-Italianism and bourgeois *malaise*. The polemic is again conducted along the lines of the need to retrieve, present and finally export the literary Italian character, and of the image of Italy as a carrier of healthy modernity:

Il teatro di Pirandello offre al pubblico pazzi, megalomani, paranoici, nevrastenici, abulici, alcoolizzati, amorali ; che deve pensare il pubblico straniero di noi italiani, se il "rappresentante" della nostra arte drammatica ci presenta tali ? Ci    molto peggio di dipingerci come briganti e mandolinisti.

A *Strapaese* il teatro di Pirandello   proibito.<sup>83</sup>

Pirandello also represents the defiance of the regional element of *italianità* : although being 'italiano in cuore'<sup>84</sup>, his popularity and the translatability of his works make him part of that Europe which for the *selvaggi* represents the anti-Italian character *par excellence*. Pirandello is associated with Bontempelli (and the *Stracittà* project) in the construction of an *italianità* 'che non sta di casa nè a Firenze nè a Trieste nè a Napoli : ma così in aria librata sulla penisola [...] [un'] italianità novecentesca da treno espresso che non essendo cittadina di nessuna città non è neppure nazionale di nessuna nazione.'<sup>85</sup>

### Massimo Bontempelli's *900*: modernity and mythopoiesis

La tâche la plus urgente et la plus précise du vingtième siècle  
sera de bâtir à nouveau le Temps et l'Espace.  
(*900*, September 1926)

With these words Massimo Bontempelli opens an article written in 1914:

Signori miei, bisogna chiudere.

Chiudere bottega. Mi dispiace, ma è così. E tirare giù i bandoni, traversare le stanghe, serrare i catenacci, perché *sarà per un pezzo*. Appiccicate, se credete, un cartellino, sul quale potete scrivere un pretesto; "Chiuso per lutto" oppure "per viaggio", o ciò che la vostra esercitata fantasia di inventori potrà suggerirvi di meglio. Si potrà anche scrivere la verità: " Chiuso per mancanza di clienti".<sup>86</sup>

[...]

L'opera vostra ha avuto soprattutto l'effetto di svalorare la letteratura, e di abituare il pubblico a farne senza.

Per questo la vostra funzione non è stata soltanto diminuita. E' soppressa. Non era una funzione, non era un ufficio. Rispondeva non a un bisogno generale, ma a una generale sopportazione.<sup>87</sup>



With these statements not only does Bontempelli ironically make a critique of contemporary literature; he also outlines the issue of the delegitimized role of the writers in that period -after the concessions to *fin de siècle* decadence and "crepuscolarismo"- and implies a redefinition of the function of literature, which should be responsive to the needs of the readers rather than elitist and self-indulgent. The greatest fault of the literary practice of his time -which has led to the estrangement of the public from literature and has resulted in the obliteration of the influence of the writer on society- is, Bontempelli states, the inability on the part of writers to satisfy the demands of the readers. After all, he claims 'il pubblico voleva essere divertito, interessato, scosso; che è il suo sacrosanto diritto di fronte a quanti fanno professione di scrivere.'<sup>88</sup>

This article is particularly significant as it presents, as early as 1914, some fundamental issues which are treated by Bontempelli in his *Preamboli* to the first four *Cahiers du 900*, published in French between 1926 and 1927. These are the necessity, in a changed society, of adapting literary production to the needs of the public, in order to restore some kind of "organic function" for the writer; the desacralization of the concept of literature and the notion of writing as "craft", "profession"; and, finally, the concept of "modern" in literature as it relates to the possibility of transforming literary practice according to these notions.<sup>89</sup>

In Bontempelli's view the end of the war had coincided with the beginning of a new epoch, marked, as Langella notices, 'dal progresso, dall'ottimismo della costruzione, dall'industrialismo, dall'urbanesimo, dalla massificazione dei bisogni e dei comportamenti, in una parola: dal trionfo del moderno su tutto ciò che poteva tuttora rappresentare il retaggio di una tradizione.'<sup>90</sup> In this new context Bontempelli sees the necessity for the man of letters to redefine his cultural and social role, so as

to be able to integrate productively in the post-war society. He is convinced that the image of the avant-garde artist has become obsolete and inadequate to represent the artistic expression of the new epoch, as he considers the break with tradition invoked by the avant-garde only a matter of formal rupture, which does not bring any fundamental change to the *letterato*'s profile and to the function of literature within society. His views on the progressive obsolescence of the futurist movement and on the necessity to redefine the figure of the man of letters in post-war society had already been ironically expressed in his short novels of 1920s and 1921 *La vita intensa* and *La vita operosa*. *La vita operosa*, in particular, by recounting the so-called "adventures" of a former writer and journalist returning to Milan just after the war, highlights the inadequacy of the traditional figure of the writer to survive and integrate in post-war urban society.

Bontempelli's aim, when founding *900*, is precisely to redefine the *letterato*'s status and present the foundations of a literary project which would integrate literary practice in the world of production and, at the same time, would grant artists a role of primacy. Part of his project is to collect in his periodical important names in European culture so as to be able to diffondere Italian culture in Europe but at the same time to promote European literature in Italy. Such an interrelationship is seen as essential in the creation of a "modern" concept of literature. Literary modernity should be defined, according to Bontempelli, in terms of a renovated concept of the function of writing.

The four *Preamboli* to the first series of *900*<sup>91</sup> constitute the theoretical basis for this project of renovation. The redefinition of literary modernity contained in the *Preamboli* and its relationship with tradition, together with the mythopoietic function invoked for literature in what is perceived as the beginning of a new age initiated by

the rise of fascism, creates the ground for Bontempelli's attempt to link his project to the creation of a cultural identity for the new regime. Bontempelli's position is less overt and more theoretically subtle than that of some of his contemporaries, but his statements on literature and art are nonetheless heavily ideologically charged.

The first issue of *900* opens with these words:

La tâche la plus urgente et la plus précise du vingtième siècle sera de bâtir à nouveau le Temps et l'Espace.

Après les avoir restaurés dans leur éternité, leur immobilité et leur froideur, nous aurons soin de les remettre à la place qu'ils avaient perdue, dans les trois dimensions de l'infini, en dehors de l'homme.<sup>92</sup>

Bontempelli advocates the redefinition of time and space as objective categories. However, as soon as they are defined as such, he claims man's role as essential not only in their definition, but also in their creation. This act of creation is the prerogative of the artist as opposed to the philosopher, since art, defined by Bontempelli as 'diligent and modest' and, polemically, with neither 'progress nor development', as opposed to philosophy, is granted a cognitive value which is denied to philosophy, as the historical process has lost its previous transparency and is only discernible *a posteriori*. The function of philosophy in the apprehension of reality is therefore partially delegitimized in favour of an art conceived of as the possibility of dominating the real by transforming it into an act of creation. The ability of art to master reality is compared by Bontempelli to the power of magic over nature:

Car, si l'art du vingtième siècle réussit à faire cet effort de construire à nouveau et de mettre au point un monde réel en dehors de l'homme, ce sera afin d'arriver à le dominer, et même à en bouleverser les lois à son gré.<sup>93</sup>



In this context of the primacy of art over philosophy the role that artists had lost is restored, and the function envisaged for them is as makers of the mythopoiesis of the new epoch, whose beginning coincides with the new century started after the war. Bontempelli claims that 'Il nous faut réapprendre l'art de bâtir, pour inventer les mythes tout nouveaux capables d'enfanter la nouvelle atmosphère qui nous est nécessaire pour respirer.'<sup>94</sup> Mythopoiesis is a central issue in the project of cultural regeneration that *900* aims to represent. The notion of myth is used to contrast the individualist concept of literature which characterized the previous century. The end of the nineteenth century coincides with the end of individual production, and, above all, individual reception. The work of art as the product of an individual is replaced in the new epoch by the myth, produced anonymously for collective reception.<sup>95</sup> Once created, myths detach themselves from their creators and acquire an autonomous status. In his polemical rejection of artistic individualism, Bontempelli insists on the necessity of anonymity in the creation of a literature for the new century, as a necessary precondition for mythopoiesis :

La fonction première et fondamentale du Poète est d'inventer des mythes, des fables, des histoires, qui s'éloignent ensuite de lui jusqu'à perdre tout lien avec sa personne, et deviennent ainsi le patrimoine commun des hommes, et presque des choses naturelles. C'est ce que deviennent précisément les oeuvres d'architecture ; souvent on ignore l'auteur des monuments le plus fameux et le plus naturellement fondus avec leur sol et leur climat.<sup>96</sup>

The writers' detachment from their products allows literature to become part of the process of the creation of the real. The notion of myth is therefore appropriated in a traditional sense, as primeval tale, and is therefore linked to the notion of palingenetic regeneration started with the birth of the new epoch ; however, it is at

the same time used against a mimetic notion of literature, as contributing to the creation rather than the representation of reality. This mythopoetic function, whose conscious expression is granted exclusively to artists, corresponds to a quest for reconciliation between art and life and gives artists a privileged access to the interpretation and cultural redefinition of a society.<sup>97</sup> The quest for art to be reconciled with life allows myth to be interpreted, from the artistic point of view, in the sense developed by Sorel as a means to act upon the present. The result is the creation of a context of cultural and artistic prominence where the reconstruction of time as regenerative mythopoiesis is contained within the spatial framework of the concept of the nation. 1900's internationalism is, in fact, in function of the redefinition of the nation in the new century. The 'myth of Italianism' -identified by Emilio Gentile as the link between the pre-war nationalist avant-garde and 1920s fascist intellectuals<sup>98</sup>, both united in a 'search for a symbiosis between art and life, culture and politics, nationalism and modernity'<sup>99</sup> - is one of the fundamental myths on which the theorization of the *Novecento* movement is based. Bontempelli declares that 'Nous les nouveaux, nous sommes assoifés d'universel, et nous nous méfions de toute internationale. C'est pour cela que, dans l'instant même où nous nous efforçons d'être des européens, nous nous sentons éperdument romains.'<sup>100</sup>

The notion of an art for a new epoch defined in terms of a strict interrelation between aesthetics and history implies a specific role for art in the interpretation of historical events. As politics has preceded art in opening the century, it is the artists' task to redefine political actions : the ultimate myth constructed by Bontempelli in his theorization is therefore the "cultural" myth, as a possibility both to dominate through artistic creation an otherwise inaccessible because shattered temporality, and to create for the artist an exclusive access to any formulation of the real.<sup>101</sup>

In this process of the reconstruction of time, carried out following mythical criteria, traditional periodization is questioned according to a notion of historical process which has lost any character of progression and is reinterpreted in mythical terms as the succession of three epochs into which Western civilization can be divided and which are simultaneously historical and artistic. The first is what Bontempelli calls the Classical Epoch, -from Homer to Christ- which is followed by the Romantic Epoch -from Christ to 'la Guerre Européenne'.<sup>102</sup> The third epoch of Western civilization begins with the 20th century, which, however, according to this idiosyncratic periodization, only starts after 1914. The war represents the watershed between the old and the new century: the artists' task is not only to reperiodize, but also to define the characteristics of the previous century against the new one. Bontempelli associates the first or Classical Epoch with the pursuit of beauty in art, which, in literary terms, manifests itself with the use of verse; verse also characterizes the Romantic Epoch, which starts with the birth of Christianity -defined by Bontempelli as 'la première victoire contre la beauté'<sup>103</sup> - and focuses on the exploration of man's interiority. The pursuit of beauty and an excessive interest in human interiority are at the origin of the intense artistic aestheticism and psychologism that reach their apex at the end of the romantic epoch and cause its corruption and decline. The process of artistic development can be identified with a progressive detachment from beauty, which, in literary terms, implies a rejection of poetry and an increasing use of prose. As the possibilities offered to literature by the birth of the new century lie in an aesthetic sphere which is completely detached from beauty and interiority, in order to take full advantage of these possibilities, the new epoch should promote a literature based on prose-narrative -as opposed to poetry- as, Bontempelli claims, 'Il ne s'agit plus de faire frissonner sa peau et de faire saillir ses



muscles, ou d'épancher son âme. Il s'agit de créer des objets, destinés à vivre dehors de nous, bien détachés de nous ; et par eux de modifier le monde.'<sup>104</sup> The model for this kind of literature is architecture as 'l'architecture devient très rapidement anonyme'<sup>105</sup> and it reshapes the world using the forms of nature.<sup>106</sup>

The artistic strategy that best represents detachment from the obsessive interest in the subject manifested by the literature of the Romantic Epoch is irony, as it represents

la forme artistique de la pudeur vis-à-vis de nos sentiments, une façon de nous éloigner du contingent, de nous délivrer d'un contact trop adhérent avec la surface des choses ; elle est un entraînement vers une clarté supérieure, une juste transition de la conception de l'oeuvre d'art comme sujet à celle de l'oeuvre d'art comme objet.<sup>107</sup>

As far as literary genres are concerned, prose-narrative centred on the plot is to be favoured, as 'dans ces contes et dans ces romans tout devient extérieur, et le point de départ lyrique devient nature et histoire.'<sup>108</sup> Literature acquires therefore a double function as the interpreter of time, as literary form becomes the concrete manifestation of the temporal/aesthetic relation. Literary production, in fact, at the same time captures and defines the essence of an epoch<sup>109</sup> : the formal genre of the lyric is therefore proposed as the equivalent of nature and history in the second or romantic epoch as opposed to prose fiction as the explanatory form of the new century.

The detachment from subject-matter that should characterize the new epoch is achieved, in Bontempelli's view, through a return to a literature conceived of as craft, which involves a desacralization of both the notion of literature and that of the work

of art or “masterpiece”, individually produced by an artistic genius for individual reception. ‘Pour avoir une bonne période littéraire’-Bontempelli argues-

il faut que l'écrivain devienne un artisan, comme les peintres de la Renaissance [...] Ecrire chaque jour un morceau, chaque année un livre : et vivre là-dessus. Le Temps pensera à élire une Oeuvre, dans le tas de pages qui se seront accumulées. A défaut d'Oeuvre, pour le moins tu auras été un probe ouvrier.<sup>110</sup>

The notion of literature as craft is related to the relationship to be established in the new century between the writer and the public. If the nineteenth century is characterized in terms of individual production for individual reception, the twentieth century writer must focus his attention on the public. After all ‘l'oeuvre d'un écrivain, son développement intime, sont une collaboration continue entre son esprit et celui de public qu'il a su se faire : c'est un jeu incessant d'actions et de réactions entre eux deux.’<sup>111</sup>

The constant interaction between the writer and the public makes possible the definition of writing as ‘action’.<sup>112</sup> The existence of a public defined as such is therefore the necessary precondition for the possibility of the writer's transforming literature into a political act. Twentieth century art should in fact be ‘popular’ and attract the public : the adjective ‘populaire’ is here ambiguously used to indicate an art intended to attract the public through the perception of its taste, which the writer should dominate rather than follow. Ultimately, it is the writer who imposes his taste on the public by skilfully interacting with it. As a result, the *900* movement claims to be suspicious of what is called, according to the criteria of the previous epoch, ‘pure art’ and tends to consider art always as ‘applied art’ : hence, the rejection of the notion of artistic masterpiece, defined as romantic, in favour of the creation of an art

which Bontempelli calls ‘d’usage quotidien’.<sup>113</sup> Within this concept particular importance is given in the periodical to the notion of the “translatability” of the literary work. Despite being published in Rome and edited by two Italian writers, the first series of 900, is, in fact, published entirely in French, which forces all its contributors to present their texts in the French translation. Such operation is in tune with the “anti-literary” stance of the periodical, which ‘aderiva alla sottocultura dei nuovi lettori che, insensibili alle finezze del linguaggio, non altro sapevano cercare nell’opera se non la cattivante dinamica delle immagini, delle situazioni, delle vicende.’<sup>114</sup>

In this context, the essence of artistic modernity is represented by the awareness of belonging to a new century whose specific artistic character is acquired through the rejection of all the preceding models, as each epoch has a specific aesthetic task by which it is defined. As art does not progress or evolve, the only law it follows in its development is what Bontempelli calls ‘the law of ingratitude’ :

Envers les écoles foudroyantes et éphémères qui creusèrent un abîme entre nous et le dix-neuvième siècle, il est urgent d’être ingrats. Quant au grand art du plein dix-neuvième, il faut se rappeler que l’admiration des ancêtres est le plus glorieux prétexte des impuissants. En regardant le dix-neuvième siècle, le vingtième doit s’efforcer d’adopter une attitude de mépris.<sup>115</sup>

Bontempelli’s version of twentieth century modernity, as it is presented in the *Preamboli*, is therefore defined against the literary past and in particular against the notion of literary tradition, which is polemically defined as non-existent as a concept, but only as a formula created *a posteriori*, an artificial concept invented in function of literary history. As a matter of fact, Bontempelli argues, tradition can only be defined in terms of a series of acts of rupture with respect to existing literary canons:



La tradition est une route qui fait n'importe quel détour, le plus long comme le plus tortueux, pourvu qu'elle ramasse en passant tout ce qu'il y a de bon. Ces badauds voient de loin la belle route qui prend au passage Dante et Boccace, Pétrarque et Laurent le Magnifique, Saint Bernardin, L'Arétin, Leopardi ; ils y voient l'Arioste et Parini et d'autres aussi. Mais ils ne savent pas que vus de près, Poliziano était un coup donné dans l'estomac à la tradition de Pétrarque, l'Arioste un grand défi à la tradition de Dante, Manzoni la rébellion la plus effrontément ouverte contre la 'glorieuse tradition des conteurs nationaux'. [...] Chacun des auteurs que la tradition accueille est un rebelle contre l'aspect traditionnel qui l'a immédiatement précédé : c'était un qui s'en fichait très dévotement.<sup>116</sup>

Bontempelli's provocative definition of literary tradition as 'continuité profonde entre des manifestations nouvelles et inattendues'<sup>117</sup> is fundamental to his concept of the reconstruction of time, as it questions every pre-determined notion of tradition, allowing artists to trace their descent back to a specific artistic tradition and re-reading the avant-garde in terms of continuity rather than as a definite act of rupture. He therefore assigns the avant-garde (and the futurist avant-garde in particular) a place in literary tradition by inserting it into the romantic epoch, and places his movement in a deliberately controversial position : on the one hand, in fact, he makes it belong to the tradition of the avant-garde (by acknowledging *novecentismo*'s filiation from it ) and on the other he relates it -through a series of assertions- to a more established, classical tradition, in particular the Italian *Quattrocento*. Fifteenth century painters, especially Masaccio, Mantegna, Piero della Francesca, for their 'réalisme exact, enveloppé d'une atmosphère de stupeur lucide'<sup>118</sup> are in fact defined as the most consonant with 900's anti-mimetic stance, as the real focus of their painting is always other than the representation of nature, as opposed, for instance, to sixteenth century painting, whose exclusive interest lies in

the represented object. The atmosphere of *stupeur* created by the tension between matter and the inherent tendency towards the transcendental invests the *Quattrocento* painting with that metaphysical character which the *900* movement aspires to achieve in literature.<sup>119</sup> In particular, it is what he calls the *Quattrocento*'s 'atmosphères à haut courant'<sup>120</sup> which are associated with pure *novecentismo* : the formula 'réalisme magique', as a definition for *900*'s art, combines those 'précision réaliste' and 'atmosphère magique' that cubism attempted without achieving<sup>121</sup> and points towards the necessity of creating a reality infused with a metaphysical quality, as opposed to sheer reproduction of an already codified real. Such a formula also allows the *Novecento* movement to link itself with a specific period already belonging to Italian tradition and at the same time to detach itself from a notion of modernity connected with the one promoted by what has by the mid-Twenties paradoxically become an established avant-garde school, that is Futurism. If the concept of tradition is subverted in terms of continuity of rupture, then the conquest of modernity operates through the re-appropriation of tradition. Bontempelli's constant shifting of boundaries between the old and the new challenges the notion of a modernity based on temporal and artistic progress. In a footnote added to the 1938 edition of his *Preamboli*<sup>122</sup> he declares : 'Questa dichiarazione sui quattrocentisti avrebbe anche dovuto salvarmi dal fastidioso attributo di *modernità* che tanti orecchianti, magari per lodarmi, mi affibbiano.'<sup>123</sup> What is rejected in this statement is not the concept of modernity as such, but a reading of it informed by avant-garde theorization. Bontempelli's controversial interpretation of modernity as related to the appropriation of tradition is offered in the analysis of the analogies between *novecentismo* and the *Quattrocento* painting :

Et chez ces peintres italiens du “Quattrocento”, bien plus utilement que chez tant d’écrivains cités de tout côté, une critique avisée pourrait découvrir les authentiques précurseurs et maîtres de certaine prose narrative très moderne.<sup>124</sup>

The futurist notion of an “absolute” modernity based on the death of time is therefore challenged on the basis of a notion of “relative” modernity based on the reconstruction of time. The sense of belonging to an artistic period which is modern only in relative terms is not only created by a non-progressive concept of time and artistic epochs, but also by the impossibility of defining a work of art as a “masterpiece”. The definition of ‘chef-d’oeuvre’ is in fact considered by the *novecentisti* ambiguous and highly suspicious, as ‘les caractères du chef-d’oeuvre sont toujours très obscurs pour le contemporain’.<sup>125</sup> Since the masterpiece is ‘cette oeuvre qui, dès que le temps où elle naquit est fini, possède la force de sortir de la portée de ce même temps et de pouvoir servir la postérité’<sup>126</sup>, only posterity can judge whether a work of art can be considered a masterpiece.

Since Futurism is the constant polemical target of Bontempelli’s theoretical statements, as the real artistic precursor against which *novecentismo* has to measure itself, Bontempelli devotes a whole section of the *preambolo* to the fourth *Cahier, Analogies*, to define *novecentismo*’s relationship with Futurism. Although acknowledging its descent from the futurist movement and sharing with Futurism what Bart van den Bossche calls ‘l’afflato eroico e prometeico [...], la prospettiva millenaria e utopica di un cambiamento totale [...], la struttura ossimorica e la forte carica polemica’<sup>127</sup>, *novecentismo* considers Futurism as a transition movement between the old and the new century, still belonging to the Romantic Epoch (‘la dernière et la plus éclatante des expressions du Romantisme’<sup>128</sup>) within which it operated a destructive function and effected its own self-destruction. Futurism is



regarded as an inevitable “end of century” phenomenon and it is precisely against it that the literature and art of the new century should define themselves.

Futurism is defined as above all ‘lyrical and ultrasubjective’, whereas the 900 movement rejects any lyrical attitude in favour of the creation of a prose-fiction which, through detachment from subject-matter, would enable the mythopoiesis of the new epoch. The lyrical tendency of Futurism makes it a movement concerned with style. Futurism’s ‘art poétique fut presque tout bâti de règles formelles.’<sup>129</sup> The literature of the new century should be against style and above all it should not have a clear-cut set of rules. Moreover, *novecentismo* does not want to be described as a “school”. The definition of school, attributed to Futurism, is part of the insertion of Futurism into literary tradition, and therefore of its collocation in the past.

In contrast to Futurism, which was avant-gardist and aristocratic, the art of the new century should be ‘populaire’ and ‘pourvoir d’oeuvres d’art la vie quotidienne des hommes, et les y mêler.’<sup>130</sup> Futurism is therefore fundamentally rejected on the basis of a new modernity, which it is for the artists of the new century to invent.

Finally, the declaration that ‘Marinetti a conquis et occupe vaillamment des tranchées très avancées. C’est derrière celles-ci que j’ai pu commencer à bâtir la ville des conquérants’<sup>131</sup>, corresponds to a version of modernity which has been described by Matei Calinescu with Bernard of Chartres’s metaphor of the ‘dwarf standing on the shoulder of a giant and being thus able to see farther and better than the giant himself.’<sup>132</sup>

In Bontempelli’s rewriting of time there is not such a distinction as history *versus* aesthetics as two separate categories, indeed the two merge into a reading of history which is carried out both in mythical and aesthetic terms, as the three epochs outlined in his theoretical writings are simultaneously historical and poetic. The task

of reconstructing time partially restores the artists' organic function and reintegrates the aesthetic sphere into the praxis of life. For Bontempelli and the *900* movement, in particular, this implies the artist's participation in the atmosphere of re-birth created in 1920s Italy by the fascist regime. It is precisely under these auspices that in November 1926, when invited to participate in the debate on fascist art, promoted by *Critica Fascista*, Bontempelli is able to claim that fascism represents '[un] fenomeno insieme spirituale e temporale' and that it is 'il fatto storico che apre la nuova epoca, la Terza Epoca della Civiltà umana.'<sup>133</sup>

### **The *Strapaese/Stracittà* dispute**

Se è vero che ho inventato *Strapaese*, non è men vero che ho inventato anche *Stracittà* e che la polemica fra *Strapaese* e *Stracittà* fu scatenata da me al solo scopo di muovere le acque della letteratura italiana, solitamente morte.  
(Curzio Malaparte, 1941)

If initially the *900* project is welcomed by the *selvaggi*<sup>134</sup>, it soon becomes clear that the two positions are -at least formally- quite incompatible : if *900*'s use of French can be acceptable to Maccari's group and the periodical's international editorial board can to some extent be seen as favourable to the exportation of Italian/fascist art, nonetheless, what Bontempelli intends to promote under the aegis of a literary Italianism is somewhat different from the *selvaggi*'s view of how the new *italianità* should be constructed. Fascism itself is not frequently mentioned in the periodical, which makes the project quite ambiguous to the *selvaggi*'s eyes. Moreover, Bontempelli's attacks on the notion of *tradizione paesana*, his cosmopolitanism, his interest in cultural forms imported from America -such as jazz

and cinema-, his acknowledgement of the futurist legacy and his concept of the necessary anonymity of the work of art, place *900* immediately on a completely different level from the regionalism that characterizes the *Strapaese* project of definition of identity, and reveal in the two periodicals a character of complementarity, which nonetheless does not create any possibility of communication between them.

As soon as *900* appears, *Strapaese* reacts to Bontempelli's project by polemically reinforcing its cultural idiosyncrasies and renames the *900* movement as *Stracittà*, the “anti-village”, the “hyper-city” of industrialism, urbanism, mass-society and technology, the ultimate triumph of imported modernity against Italian tradition, which represents the counterpart to *Strapaese* -as once Rattaglia, for different reasons, was- and against which the *selvaggi* channel their polemical energy.

In his article *Strapaese e Stracittà*<sup>135</sup> Malaparte defines the question in terms of bourgeois versus anti-bourgeois culture : for all its claims to modernity, the only aesthetic criterion for *Stracittà*'s literary production is, as a matter of fact, the literary taste of the bourgeoisie, and the *Stracittà* writers' task is to realise the bourgeoisie's artistic ideals, which are internationalist only ‘per non aver l'aria di codini agli occhi delle borghesie senza tradizioni delle due rive dell'Atlantico’<sup>136</sup> :

E' di cattivo gusto secondo questi letterati stracittadini e questi borghesissimi ammiratori della letteratra di *Stracittà*, rimaner fedeli ai modi e agli spiriti della nostrana civiltà letteraria. Sta di fatto che gli scrittori stracittadini incarnano alla perfezione l'ideale piccolo-borghese del letterato alla moda, sempre al corrente delle novità di Parigi, di Londra, di New York, e indaffarato a tradurre in un italiano approssimativo il gergo dovizioso e preciso dei porti dell'Atlantico e delle città del Pacifico. La nostra società borghese non vuol fare a meno dei suoi Mac-Orlan, dei suoi Ramon Gomez, Ivan Goll, Joyce, Paul Morand : e s'incanta agli arzigogoli della psicoanalisi di quel povero Joyce italiano che è il triestino Italo Svevo.<sup>137</sup>



Once *Stracittà* is created as *Strapaese*'s intellectual and artistic enemy, the attacks against it are repeated. A famous example is the caption of a cartoon drawn by Maccari in the 15 December 1927 issue of *Il Selvaggio* :

I novecentisti, avendo gli Strapaesani occupata e messa a sacco *Stracittà*, si preparano a passare sotto le forche caudine della loro sconfitta. C'è chi, impaurito, a mani giunte invoca pietà ; altri disperato e maledicendo all'errore commesso, si strappa i capelli e si picchia i pugni in testa ; qualcuno è già cadavere, qualcuno scappa precipitosamente ; i più deficienti seguitano a ballare il ciarlestòn. Nella catastrofe sono emersi alcuni tipi di perfetti novecentisti, mezzi svizzeri, mezzi francesi, mezzi bolscevichi ; di uno è stato detto che fosse un informatore militare d'una potenza straniera ; d'un altro che abbia diffamato il Fascismo [...] Ciononostante il divo Bontempelli seguita a battere la grancassa ; ma egli evidentemente vive fra le nuvole.<sup>138</sup>

Even a prominent intellectual like Giovanni Papini takes part in the dispute with his *Accuse alla Città*<sup>139</sup>, accusing cities of being 'macchinazioni ben riuscite per corrompere gli elementi più necessari alla vita', 'rinneamento della natura', 'antiparadis[i]' ; in the *Gazzettino Ufficiale di Strapaese* of 15 October 1928 *Stracittà* is accused of 'ciarlataneria, bassa retorica, sfacciata cortigianeria, affarismo [...], bistolfismo, macchinismo'<sup>140</sup>. Gioacchino Contri in his *Atto di Fede in Strapaese*<sup>141</sup> interprets the *Strapaese/Stracittà* dispute as the essence of a cultural position assumed by the *selvaggi* against the *novecentisti* and the *futurists*, which can be summarised as

esaltazione della Tradizione e della Religione, ruralizzazione dell'Italia, ritorno a un gusto artistico più consono alla nostra storia, difesa delle nostre peculiari qualità distintive dalle idee e costumi d'altri popoli, potenziamento demografico, lotta intransigente alle falsità e al confusionismo trionfante nella cosiddetta vita moderna.<sup>142</sup>

Bontempelli, polemically, does not directly reply to the attacks, claiming that the enemies of *900* are not worth any serious consideration. However, taking up the dispute is the occasion for Bontempelli and his ‘*novecentieri*’<sup>143</sup> to restate their declaration of intent and make it more unequivocally in line with how they operate to appropriate issues concerning the regime's policies. Therefore, the issue of *900* published on 21 February 1929 publishes an article, entitled *Posizione*, where *900* rejects the accusations of anti-traditionalism, anti-nationalism, ultra-urbanism and avant-gardism and states its position as, in effect, ‘il solo [movimento] che [...] un giorno potrà degnamente essere accolto da quella bizzarra corrente che si chiama “la tradizione”’<sup>144</sup>. Besides claiming traditionalism and italianism (in terms of anti-romanticism and ‘*ripresa mediterranea*’) *900* also rejects the attempt to identify it with the notion of ultra-urbanism, defined as ‘un sogno grottesco e in perfetta malafede’. As a matter of fact, the crucial issue of ruralism as opposed to urbanism in the fascist discourse is not ignored by *900*. Indeed, in an article by Giovanni Pesce entitled *Italia Rurale*<sup>145</sup>, *900* appropriates the notion of ruralism by redefining the concept according to a view of rurality as a *forma mentis*, typically and traditionally Italian, which is independent from bucolic interpretations of agricultural life. According to this revised definition, the notion of “rural Italy” should be applied to ‘l’Italia che vive e opera lontano dalle influenze dirette e dalle complicazioni delle grandi città, conservando la linea delle più sane e nobili tradizioni morali e religiose della nostra stirpe contro le infiltrazioni delle novità esotiche, e delle depravazioni urbanistiche’<sup>146</sup>, in which case rural Italy and *Italia paesana* are the same thing. The ‘Italia paesana’<sup>147</sup>, according to Pesce, should not be interpreted as conservative and static, but as revolutionary and dynamic, and should make use of the most modern technology to be constantly active against ‘l’urbanesimo dilagante’.

Although the *Strapaese/Stracittà* dispute vehemently carries on for years, it is difficult to draw a clear theoretical demarcation between the two movements, not only because some of the intellectuals involved in the argument write in both *900* and *Il Selvaggio*<sup>148</sup>, but also because of the internal contradictions identifiable within the two movements. For instance, Luciano Troisio notices how the *selvaggi's* "ruralism" is, after all, fictional, as is *900's* urban model. In particular, both *Il Selvaggio* and *900* fail to realise their cultural models, as they draw on constructed images of Italy, which do not correspond to any real context.<sup>149</sup>

As far as Bontempelli is concerned, he conceives of the art of the new epoch as a return to craft, *mestiere*, and artists as *mestieranti*, against the notion of a work of art as a "masterpiece". This desacralization of artistic production responds to the necessity for a concept of artistic activity as a profession, linked to the idea of the artist as the creator of myths which should be accessible to the public; myths being collective by definition, the artist should therefore aim at reaching the masses. However, as Luciano Troisio points out, *900*

tirava 2000 copie, era mal distribuita, pretendeva di far leggere autori russi o inglesi, in francese, al lettore italiano. *900 non era letta* che da una ristrettissima élite, come dimostrano anche i quattro numeri in francese, abbastanza facilmente reperibili sul mercato antiquario e sempre, inesorabilmente, intonsi.<sup>150</sup>

*Il Selvaggio*, on the other hand, is presented by Troisio as having a manneristic and stereotypical view of rural culture and being therefore fundamentally bourgeois. Indeed, the main genre found in the periodical, the satirical short story associated with the *barzelletta*, is seen as the expression of an urban civilization and bourgeois



culture -in its almost neurotic compression and tension towards the ending- as opposed to the *favola*, which is the real narrative expression of the static nature and the slower perception of time of the rural world. The *selvaggi*, therefore, although claiming to express the needs of the rural areas and to defend rural culture, reveal themselves as bourgeois and give a superficial and stereotypical representation of the world they claim to protect, ‘filtrando tutto con l'ottica astigmatica borghese’.<sup>151</sup> Finally, Gianni Grana's words summarize most critics' position with regard to the *Strapaese/Stracittà* dispute, when -quoting Alberto Asor Rosa- he outlines that ‘*modernità e antimodernità nel fascismo* -"e potrebbe essere perfino la modernità del ritorno alla tradizione"- appartengono a una dialettica interna, non oppositiva, ma sempre a sostegno dell' "ordine esistente”’<sup>152</sup>. Such internal dialectic, however, although clearly identifiable, is not artificially created exclusively to support the existing order : from the analysis of the various redefinitions of the concepts of tradition and modernity -as they emerge from the periodicals- it is possible to identify –as with the *Debate on Fascist Art*- a series of positions which partially reflect pre-existing debates. The ideological and theoretical fluidity of those years allows various intellectuals to be involved in the construction of a cultural identity for the new regime, giving contributions from different points of view. The result is a process of merging of political and aesthetic issues and the reconciliation of political subservience with a simultaneous attempt to create versions of fascism based on the elaboration of aesthetic concepts. A clear example of such a process is represented by Ardengo Soffici's theoretical work in the 1920s, as will be seen in chapter five.

<sup>1</sup> Günther Berghaus, *Futurism and Politics : Between Anarchist Rebellion and Fascist Reaction, 1909-1944* (Providence-Oxford : Berghahn), 1995, p. 227.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 232. Berghaus here refers to the speech delivered by Mussolini at the Academy of Fine Arts in Perugia, published in *Il Popolo d'Italia* (7 October 1926), which started the debate on fascist art, and appeared in *Critica Fascista* between 1926 and 1927.

<sup>3</sup> Giuseppe Langella stresses how the problematic nature of the intellectuals' position was not only a feature of the fascist regime, but it had characterized the relationship between culture and politics since Italy's unification. The only attempts to overcome the intellectuals' subaltern condition had been made by Prezzolini's "La Voce", Salvemini's "L'Unità", the futurist and the nationalist movements, but their effort to gain some kind of hegemonic position exhausted itself in the war experience. In this context, the function of the new regime was 'di appesantire ulteriormente, di esasperare fino al limite massimo di rottura lo statuto subalterno dell' intellettuale, polverizzando la mediazione culturale tentata in precedenza e dissociando irreparabilmente l'amministrazione della politica dalla giurisdizione letteraria.' *Il Secolo delle riviste. Lo statuto letterario dal "Baretti" a "Primato"* (Milano: Vita e Pensiero, 1982), pp. 25-26.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 26.

<sup>5</sup> 'Il Duce parlando nell'Accademia di Belle Arti di Perugia ebbe a fare delle dichiarazioni molto importanti che noi qui riportiamo nella loro parte essenziale, così come furono riprodotte sul "Popolo d'Italia" del 7 ottobre corr.

Il Duce ha detto, tra l'altro, di essere entrato nell'Accademia per rendere omaggio all'Arte, che considera come una delle espressioni fondamentali dello spirito, poiché non vi è civiltà senza l'arte, che si può dire segni l'aurora di ogni civiltà. Dopo aver rilevato come anche nel Rinascimento, ai tempi in cui l'Italia era divisa, la sua arte era un privilegio e una gloria per essa, ha aggiunto che oggi, in cui tutte le condizioni più auspicate dai grandi italiani, e prima e fondamentale la unità, si sono realizzate, può svilupparsi nella nostra terra una grande Arte che comprenda in sé e a sua volta informi tutte le manifestazioni della vita, un'arte che deve essere tradizionalista e al tempo stesso moderna, che deve guardare al passato e al tempo stesso all'avvenire.

"Noi non dobbiamo rimanere dei contemplativi -ha detto il Duce- non dobbiamo sfruttare il patrimonio del passato. Noi dobbiamo creare un nuovo patrimonio da porre accanto a quello antico, dobbiamo creare un'arte nuova, un'arte dei nostri tempi, un'arte fascista."

Poiché tali dichiarazioni hanno un'importanza eccezionale, la nostra rivista ha domandato agli amici artisti fascisti la loro opinione sulla possibilità e la necessità di un'arte fascista, di un'arte nuova che sia il segno più eccellente dei tempi nuovi. Hanno inviato già risposte Soffici, Maccari, Bontempelli, Malaparte, C.E. Oppo, A. De Stefani, Pavolini, E. Rocca ; E. Cecchi ; Puccini, Bragaglia ed altri innumerevoli e tutti rappresentanti egregi dell'arte contemporanea. Pubblicheremo man mano queste opinioni, sicuri di contribuire, con una discussione ampia, serena, esauriente (è nei desideri!) ad una visione più precisa e netta di questo supremo problema dell'intelletto e dello spirito che occorre risolvere per la più completa gloria dell'Italia fascista.' (*Critica Fascista*, 15 October 1926, p. 383)

<sup>6</sup> Giuseppe Bottai, 'Proponimento', *Critica Fascista*, 15 June 1923, cited in Luisa Mangoni, *L'interventismo della cultura. Intellettuali e riviste del fascismo* (Roma-Bari: Laterza, 1974), p. 76.

<sup>7</sup> Gherardo Casini, 'Radicalismo legislativo e intransigenza', *Critica Fascista*, 15 September 1925, cited in Albertina Vittoria, *Le riviste del duce. Politica e cultura del regime* (Parma: Guanda, 1983), p. 43.

<sup>8</sup> Gherardo Casini, 'Rivoluzione imbalsamata', *Critica Fascista*, 15 February 1927, cited in *Le riviste del duce*, p. 43.

<sup>9</sup> Giuseppe Bottai, 'Dichiarazioni sul revisionismo', *Critica fascista*, 15 July 1924, cited in *Le riviste del duce*, p. 45.

<sup>10</sup> Alessandro Masi notices that ' "critica", "autocritica", "discussione", "revisione" sono state per Bottai parole legate ad un filo continuo. Parole che fecero della sua dottrina politica una sorta di coronata torre ideologica frammezzata da interposti e da verifiche continue, da riprove e da conferme, da slanci poetici e da misurate geometrie emozionali.' (Introduction to Giuseppe Bottai, *La politica delle arti. Scritti 1918-1943*, Roma: Editalia, 1992, p. 11)

<sup>11</sup> *Il secolo delle riviste*, p. 231.

<sup>12</sup> Introduction to *La politica delle arti*, p. 10.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 19.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 20.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*



<sup>16</sup> Cfr. Jeffrey Schnapp and Barbara Spackman, eds, 'Selections from the great debate on fascism and culture : Critica Fascista 1926-1927', *Stanford Italian Review*, 8 (1990), p. 236.

<sup>17</sup> See Alessandro Pavolini, 'Dell'arte fascista', *Critica Fascista*, 21 November 1926, pp 393-395.

<sup>18</sup> Ardengo Soffici, 'Arte fascista', *Critica Fascista*, 15 October 1926, p 384.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>20</sup> 'Un'arte non oggettivamente veristica ma che nella rappresentazione del vero rivelasse lo spirito lirico e la volontà stilistica dell'autore' ('Arte fascista', p. 385)

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>22</sup> 'Una condizione imprescindibile per arrivare alla modernità è l'assimilazione, l'assorbimento, indi la necessaria negazione di tutti valori estetici precedenti', 'Primi principi di un'estetica futurista', in *Archivi del futurismo*, ed. by Maria Drudi Gambillo and Teresa Fiori (Roma: De Luca, 1958), p. 566.

<sup>23</sup> On the notion of "modernità sana" versus "modernità perversa" in the fascist epoch see Emilio Gentile, *Le origini dell'ideologia fascista* (Bologna: Il Mulino, 1996), pp. 42-45 and 348-364.

<sup>24</sup> 'Dell'arte fascista', p. 393.

<sup>25</sup> 'Lentamente il senso spontaneo della tradizione, la profondità di umani significati, la classicità dell'arte nostra si disperdono, vengono sommerse dal flutto decadente, riaffiorano a zone, per intermittenze sempre più brevi. Ai barbari passa il primato. Si avvicina, annunciato da mille battistrada, il Romanticismo : il Romanticismo che scaverà, tra popolo e artisti, abissi di reciproca incomprensione.' ('Dell'arte fascista', p. 394)

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 393.

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 394.

<sup>28</sup> Mino Maccari, 'Arte fascista', *Critica Fascista*, 1 November 1926, p. 397.

<sup>29</sup> Anton Giulio Bragaglia, 'Lo stile è l'epoca', *Critica Fascista*, 15 November 1926, p. 417.

<sup>30</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>31</sup> Curzio Malaparte, 'Botta e risposta', *Critica Fascista*, 15 November 1926, p. 419.

<sup>32</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>33</sup> Cipriano Efisio Oppo, 'Arte fascista arte italiana', *Critica Fascista*, 1 February 1927, p. 44.

<sup>34</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>35</sup> *Ibid.* It is difficult to estimate to what extent Oppo is giving a dispassionate contribution to the debate or is trying to gain a position within the regime's cultural elite. According to Philip Cannistraro, by 1925 he was rather disillusioned with Fascism. Cannistraro reports Oppo writing to Di Marzio in December 1925 : "Dear Friend : Do you see where I am writing from ? Perhaps you have not heard yet of the sordid event. Anyhow, *L'Idea nazionale* is dead and we have all made the March on the Tribuna. A Melancholy March : Farewell Youth !... Now I think only of my art. Everything else is repulsive", in 'Mussolini's Cultural Revolution', *Journal of Contemporary History*, 7 (1972), p. 139.

<sup>36</sup> Massimo Bontempelli, 'Arte fascista', *Critica Fascista*, 15 November 1926, p. 416.

<sup>37</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>38</sup> 'Per un'arte fascista', *Critica Fascista*, 1 February 1927, p. 43.

<sup>39</sup> *Futurism...* p. 235

<sup>40</sup> Filippo Tommaso Marinetti, 'L'arte fascista futurista', *Critica Fascista*, 1 January 1927, p. 3.

<sup>41</sup> Pseudonym of Vincenzo Fani.

<sup>42</sup> Volt, 'Nuova arte fascista', *Critica Fascista*, 1 November 1926, p. 398.

<sup>43</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>44</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>45</sup> *Critica Fascista*, 15 February 1927, pp. 61-64.

<sup>46</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 62.

<sup>47</sup> Published in *900* in September 1926.

<sup>48</sup> Cfr. the opening section of Chapter 1 of this thesis.

<sup>49</sup> 'Selections...', p. 237.

<sup>50</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>51</sup> The notion of "oxymoron" referred to fascist culture is used by Jeffrey Schnapp, in his essay 'Epic Demonstrations. Fascist Modernity and the 1932 Exhibition of the Fascist Revolution', in *Fascism, Aesthetics and Culture*, ed. by Richard Golsan (Hanover: University Press of New England, 1992), pp 1-37.

<sup>52</sup> *Il Secolo delle riviste*, p. 241.

<sup>53</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 239.

<sup>54</sup> *Il Selvaggio* was published between 1924 and 1943. During this long period it had editorial offices in Colle Val D'Elsa (1924-1926), Florence (1926-1928), Siena (1928-1931), Turin (1931), and Rome



(1932-1943). It hosted a variety of articles on politics, art and culture. Between 1924 and 1926 it focused mainly on politics, while after 1926 it concentrated on literature and culture. Its general tone was satirical. Its main contributors, at least during the Twenties were, Mino Maccari (who often used pseudonyms, such as Sugo di Bosco, Orco Bisorco and Il Selvaggio), Ardengo Soffici and Curzio Malaparte. It also published illustrations by Maccari, Soffici, Carrà, Morandi, Rosai, Fattori.

<sup>55</sup> *Il Selvaggio*, 1-14 March 1926, p. 1.

<sup>56</sup> Cfr. *L'interventismo della cultura*, p. 110.

<sup>57</sup> *Il Selvaggio*, 1 December 1925, quoted in *L'interventismo della cultura*, pp. 110-111.

<sup>58</sup> The idea that 'non c'è che l'arte' was very widespread among artists, as an expression of their disillusion, at the end of the war. Significant, in this regard, is a quote from Boccioni, mentioned on p. 30 of *L'interventismo della cultura*: 'da questa esistenza io uscirò con un disprezzo per tutto ciò che non è arte. Nulla è più terribile dell'arte. Tutto ciò che vedo al presente è un gioco di fronte a una buona pennellata, a un verso armonioso, a un giusto accordo. Tutto, in confronto a ciò, è una questione di meccanica, di abitudine, di pazienza, di memoria. C'è solo l'arte.'

<sup>59</sup> 'Addio del passato'.

<sup>60</sup> Sugo di Bosco, 'A rapporto con Mussolini', *Il Selvaggio*, 13 December 1925, quoted in *L'interventismo della cultura*, p. 112.

<sup>61</sup> The *selvaggi's* position against Bottai's political "call for order" is made clear by Maccari when he provocatively explains the origin of his group's name: 'Ci chiamiamo *Selvaggi* per distinguerci da quei fascisti addomesticati, che consideriamo la peste bubbonica del Partito Nazionale Fascista'. Cited in Giuliano Manacorda, *Letteratura e cultura del periodo fascista* (Milano: Principato Editore, 1974), p. 7.

<sup>62</sup> Cfr. *L'interventismo della cultura*, p. 66.

<sup>63</sup> Giuseppe Bottai, *Vent'anni e un giorno* (Milano: 1949), cited in *L'interventismo della cultura*, p. 67.

<sup>64</sup> Walter Adamson, 'The Culture of Italian Fascism and the Crisis of Modernity : The Case of *Il Selvaggio*', *Journal of Contemporary History*, 30 (1995), p. 556.

<sup>65</sup> Punta-e-Taglio, 'Strapaese', *Il Selvaggio*, 7 October 1926, p. 2.

<sup>66</sup> Punta-e-Taglio, 'Qui, o signori, incomincia la cronaca di Strapaese', *Il Selvaggio*, 15-30 July 1926, pp. 1-2.

<sup>67</sup> 'Il Fascismo, restauratore degli autentici valori nazionali, ha ridato, e il *Selvaggio* ne è prova palpitante, una coscienza politica agli artisti.

Strapaese, originale espressione di bisogni spirituali di un popolo che ha ritrovato la sua unità nel Fascismo e che la vuol permeare dei propri caratteri, attraverso quella necessaria continua selezione in cui consiste la modernità, non è stato difatti creato da letterati, ma da artisti. Questo punto è essenziale e non va dimenticato.' (Orco Bisorco, 'Gazzettino Ufficiale di Strapaese', *Il Selvaggio*, 15 January 1928, p. 97)

<sup>68</sup> Punta-e-Taglio, 'Strapaese', *Il Selvaggio*, 7 October 1926, p. 2.

<sup>69</sup> Orco Bisorco, 'Gazzettino ufficiale di Strapaese', *Il Selvaggio*, 16 September 1927, p. 61.

<sup>70</sup> Orco Bisorco, 'Gazzettino ufficiale di Strapaese', *Il Selvaggio*, 15 January 1928, p. 97.

<sup>71</sup> Punta-e-Taglio, 'Casi di Strapaese e stracasi di Rattaglia', *Il Selvaggio*, 7 September 1926, p. 1.

<sup>72</sup> 'Lo stile è l'epoca', *Critica Fascista*, 15 November 1926, p. 417. What Bragaglia shares with Maccari's *selvaggi* is the attitude of rejection towards what he calls "rimasticamento di stili storici" which prevents the development of an original style for the fascist epoch. However, despite agreeing on some aesthetic and political issues, the *selvaggi* make Bragaglia (together with such artists as Pirandello and Sem Benelli) the object of their polemical attacks, which is significant in terms of the diverse filiations produced by the pre-war avant-garde which are then gathered together by fascist ideology. In the 7 September 1926 issue of *Il Selvaggio*, for instance, the *selvaggi* comment: 'Frosinone, patria di Anton Giulio Bragaglia, è un paese tanto selvaggio e ha tanta simpatia e tanto entusiasmo per il nostro giornale che, infischandosi delle disposizioni stilistiche emanate dal P.N.F., ha intitolato la più bella delle sue vie a Maccari, nostro direttore. Sarebbe superfluo descrivere la rabbia, l'ira e l'invidia di Anton Giulio !' (p. 27)

<sup>73</sup> 'Lo stile è l'epoca'.

<sup>74</sup> 7 September and 7 October 1926.

<sup>75</sup> Orco Bisorco, 'Gazzettino ufficiale di Strapaese', *Il Selvaggio*, 15 January 1928, p. 97.

<sup>76</sup> Giacinto Agnoletti, 'Un po' di Dante', *Il Selvaggio*, 15 April 1928, p. 27.

<sup>77</sup> *Ibid.*



<sup>78</sup> Polvere, 'Cronaca nera', *Il Selvaggio*, 30 January 1928, p. 5. As regards the relationship between the *selvaggi* and Leopardi, Luciano Troisio points out that with the publication of Leopardi's *Discorso sui costumi degli italiani* in *Il Selvaggio* in 1934, *Il Selvaggio* presents Leopardi as 'il campione della tradizione italiana nella classicità.' Cfr. *Le riviste di Strapaese e Stracittà. Il Selvaggio, L'Italiano, "900"* (Treviso: Canova, 1975), p. 82.

<sup>79</sup> 'E' un fatto già osservato da molti che la società borghese contemporanea non è più capace d'intendere la grande tradizione italiana. Dante, Petrarca, Ariosto, Leopardi, son lettera morta, e da un pezzo, per i piccoli borghesi del bello italo regno. L'ideale letterario della borghesia, che per quarant'anni e più ha avuto i suoi santoni in Carducci e in D'Annunzio, e, da ultimo, in Da Verona, sta ormai prendendo prendendo forma e sostanza negli scrittori di Stracittà, ai quali non par vero di assumere con poca fatica il ruolo impiegatizio di letterati aulici dei salotti della classe media.' (Curzio Malaparte, 'Strapaese e Stracittà', *Il Selvaggio*, 10 November 1927, p. 79.)

<sup>80</sup> The *selvaggi's* definition of "modernism" is made clear in an article published in *Il Selvaggio* in 1934, entitled 'Perché combattiamo il modernismo?', where modernism is defined in terms of "moda" and as 'un'interpretazione arbitraria, internazionalistica, intellettualistica, occasionale della modernità.' (Anonimo, 'Perché combattiamo il modernismo?', *Il Selvaggio*, nn. 6-7, 1934, in *Le riviste di Strapaese e Stracittà*, pp. 143-144).

<sup>81</sup> *Strapaese's* attitude towards the notion of rural tradition is, as a matter of fact ambiguous; if, on the one hand it refuses to allow its ruralism to be interpreted as nostalgic and stereotypical, it nonetheless presents itself using a very stereotypical imagery. Two interesting instances are found in two articles published in *Il Selvaggio* and in another *Strapaese* journal, *L'Italiano*, edited by Leo Longanesi, where the following declarations are found:

'Strapaese non è nè un fenomeno d'estetismo ; nè un aspetto di gretto regionalismo o campanilismo ; nè un circolo o vuoi cenacolo letterario ; nè un tempietto ove si adori il passato e ci si nasconda per sfuggire alla realtà, ai bisogni e agli imperativi dei giorni d'oggi ; nè una gretta religione delle cose piccine, del paesello arcadico, del casolare tranquillo, del pio bove, del placido ruscello, del pacifico olivo, del sereno pagliaio, del buon vino, del pane odoroso, del muro scrostato, del pisciatoio ottocentesco, delle cose dimenticate, dell'odor di stantio, della "patina del tempo", degli "uomini all'antica" e via scorrendo.' (Orco Bisorco, 'Gazzettino ufficiale di Strapaese', *Il Selvaggio*, 24 November 1927, p. 81).

'ASCOLTATE: noi facemmo la rivoluzione per portar nelle città il sapore del latte fresco, il profumo della sfoglia, del fieno, la fragranza delle pesche, l'odore del mosto, delle siepi di more, la freschezza dei vostri canti, la buona fede della vostra capa, la santità della vostra intolleranza, la gelosia per la vostra casa, la naturalezza dei vostri costumi, l'italianità insomma della vostra rozzezza.' (*L'Italiano*, n. 8, 1926, cited in *Le riviste di Strapaese e Stracittà*, p. 192).

<sup>82</sup> Orco Bisorco, 'Gazzettino ufficiale di Strapaese', *Il Selvaggio*, 16 September 1927, p. 61.

<sup>83</sup> Orco Bisorco, 'Gazzettino ufficiale di Strapaese', *Il Selvaggio*, 30 January 1927, p. 6.

<sup>84</sup> Berto Ricci, 'Pirandello', *Il Selvaggio*, 30 September 1927, p. 69.

<sup>85</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>86</sup> Massimo Bontempelli, 'Per i poveri letterati', *La Nazione*, September 1914, in *L'Avventura Novecentista* (Firenze: Vallecchi, 1974), p. 3.

<sup>87</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 5.

<sup>88</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 4.

<sup>89</sup> In this article Bontempelli maintains that what has been written in Italy up to 1914 still belongs to nineteenth century and its value has definitively been destroyed by the war. Twentieth century Italian literature does not exist yet and will only be created out of the post-war changed circumstances : 'Proclamavate di aprire il secolo ventesimo, e in realtà continuavate a raccattar briciole del secolo decimonono [...] Ripetevate, sbriciolati e messi a rammollare nell'acqua del vostro cervello, l'estetismo, il romanticismo, l'arcadia, tutte le cose più sorpassate. La canzone era vecchia quanto la voce monotona e fioca. Il primo colpo di cannone l'ha soppressa. [...] forse, tra qualche anno, a guerra finita, a crisi risolta... si rimetterà al lavoro quotidiano delle braccia e della penna, allora forse il vostro sforzo vi avrà dato un'anima, e forse quest'anima sboccherà in qualche cosa che ora non si può immaginare [...] E quel qualche cosa [...] comincerà a essere 'la letteratura italiana del secolo XX' ('Per i poveri letterati', pp. 4-6).

<sup>90</sup> *Il secolo delle riviste*, p. 246.

<sup>91</sup> *Justification*, September 1926; *Fondements*, December 1926; *Conseils*, March 1927; *Analogies*, June 1927.



The periodical *900. Cahiers d'Italie et d'Europe*, edited by Bontempelli and -between 1926 and 1927- Curzio Malaparte, was published in Rome between 1926 and 1929. The first four issues were published in French by *La Voce* publishing house, the following ones in Italian by the *Sapientia* publishing house.

*900* had an international editorial board (Ramon Gomez de la Serna, James Joyce, George Kaiser, Pierre Mac Orlan, Ilya Ehrenburg) and aimed at an international diffusion. It hosted, besides fiction, contributions on literature and cultural issues.

<sup>92</sup> 'Justification', *900*, September 1926, p. 7.

<sup>93</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 8.

<sup>94</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>95</sup> Bürger maintains that one of the main features of avant-garde theorization is the negation of artistic individual production for individual reception, which is essential in autonomous art. Cfr Peter Bürger, *Theory of the Avant-Garde*, trans. by Michael Shaw (Minneapolis : University of Minnesota Press, 1984), pp. 53-54.

<sup>96</sup> Massimo Bontempelli, 'Conseils', *900*, March 1927, p. 11.

<sup>97</sup> Cfr. Bart van den Bossche, 'Miti per il Novecento : *L'Avventura novecentista* di Massimo Bontempelli', *Narrativa*, 16 (1999), pp. 15-33. On the notion of '*economia mitica* di una società' see p. 19.

<sup>98</sup> See Chapter 1 of this thesis.

<sup>99</sup> Emilio Gentile, 'The Conquest of Modernity : From Modernist Nationalism to Fascism', *Modernism/Modernity*, 1 (1994), p. 73.

<sup>100</sup> 'Justification', p. 12.

<sup>101</sup> Cfr. Antonio Saccone, *Massimo Bontempelli. Il mito del Novecento* (Napoli: Liguori, 1979), p. 96.

<sup>102</sup> 'Justification', p. 10.

<sup>103</sup> Massimo Bontempelli, 'Fondements', *900*, December 1926, p. 9.

<sup>104</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 10.

<sup>105</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>106</sup> Bontempelli's theorization is indebted to the theorization of metaphysical painting carried out between 1918 and 1921 in the periodical *Valori Plastici*. In particular, the reference to architecture can be found in Giorgio De Chirico, 'Il senso architettonico nella pittura antica', *Valori Plastici*, May-June 1920, pp. 59-61.

<sup>107</sup> 'Fondements', p. 11.

<sup>108</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>109</sup> Bontempelli was not alone in promulgating the necessity of creating an artistic style that would define and express the essence of the new epoch. Anton Giulio Bragaglia had expressed the same concern in an article entitled 'Lo stile è l'epoca', published in the 15 November 1926 issue of *Critica Fascista* as a contribution to the debate on fascist art.

<sup>110</sup> Massimo Bontempelli, 'Conseils', *900*, March 1927, p. 9.

<sup>111</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 8.

<sup>112</sup> 'Ecrire, c'est agir, au plein sens du mot', ('Conseils', pp. 8-9).

<sup>113</sup> Massimo Bontempelli, 'Analogies', *900*, June 1927, p. 12.

<sup>114</sup> *Il secolo delle riviste*, p. 248.

<sup>115</sup> 'Justification', p. 11.

<sup>116</sup> 'Conseils', p. 12.

<sup>117</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>118</sup> 'Analogies', p. 7.

<sup>119</sup> In his literary theorization Bontempelli is heavily influenced by the theorization of Metaphysical painting. He makes his debt explicit when he declares *novecentismo*'s affinity with it : 'Ce prétendu "fumisme" (auquel aboutit l'expérience de l'ironie), ce "funambolisme", par lequel les critiques graves ont cru écarter d'un seul mot tant de problèmes personnels des écrivains nouveaux, - n'est que le premier apprentissage de notre sens nouveau des ces horizons en formation. On l'appelé aussi (surtout en peinture) "métaphysique", ce qui n'est pas du tout malavisé' ('Fondements', p. 12).

<sup>120</sup> 'Analogies', p. 8.

<sup>121</sup> Although Bontempelli acknowledges his filiation from Cubism ('Peut-être qu'en ce moment nous sommes les enfants de l'antithèse entre l'esprit cubiste et l'esprit futuriste...', 'Justification', p. 11), he accuses the cubist movement of being too 'littéraire' and 'impopulaire' and therefore of belonging (together with Futurism), to the Romantic Epoch (Cfr. 'Analogies', p. 8).

<sup>122</sup> Published in Italian, together with other articles, under the title *L'avventura novecentista*.



<sup>123</sup> 'Analogie', in *L'avventura novecentista* (Firenze: Vallecchi, 1974), p. 21.

<sup>124</sup> 'Analogies', p. 9.

<sup>125</sup> 'Analogies', p. 12.

<sup>126</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>127</sup> 'Miti per il Novecento', p. 21.

<sup>128</sup> 'Analogies', pp. 9-10.

<sup>129</sup> 'Analogies', p. 11.

<sup>130</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>131</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 13.

<sup>132</sup> Matei Calinescu, *Five Faces of Modernity. Modernism, Avant-Garde, Decadence, Kitsch, Postmodernism* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1987), p. 15. On this notion of modernity as related to the idea of decadence see also p. 155.

<sup>133</sup> 'Arte fascista', *Critica Fascista*, November 1926, p. 416.

<sup>134</sup> Giuseppe Langella points out how, initially, the europeanism of the *900* project could appear, to Maccari's eyes, complementary to that of *Il Selvaggio* in terms of promotion of Italian art abroad, as it would spread in Europe the values of a truly Italian and fascist art, previously selected by Maccari's group. He reports that *Il Selvaggio* published an advertising column for the new review in the 16-30 April 1926 issue: '*900*, redatta in francese, e destinata a una diffusione internazionale, farà conoscere col necessario tatto e coll'indispensabile buon gusto, i valori, attualmente così poco noti, artistici, letterari, intellettuali, della moderna Italia vivente.' (*Il Secolo delle riviste*, p. 245)

<sup>135</sup> *Il Selvaggio*, 10 November 1927, p. 79.

<sup>136</sup> 'Strapaese e Stracittà'.

<sup>137</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>138</sup> *Il Selvaggio*, 15 December 1927, p. 89.

<sup>139</sup> *Il Selvaggio*, 30 December 1927, p. 93.

<sup>140</sup> Orco Bisorco, 'Gazzettino ufficiale di Strapaese' *Il Selvaggio*, 15 October 1928, p. 69.

<sup>141</sup> *Il Selvaggio*, 15 December 1928, p. 82.

<sup>142</sup> 'Atto di Fede'.

<sup>143</sup> In one of his opening articles Bontempelli explains the choice of that name for the contributors to his journal: "'Novecentisti" in senso generico si chiamano tutti coloro che passano la maggior parte della loro vita nel secolo ventesimo. "Novecentisti" in senso specifico si chiamano i pittori del "gruppo Novecento Italiano", i quali primi ebbero la felice idea di assumere come loro determinante e aggruppante questa limitazione temporale. "Novecentieri" si chiamano coloro che più assiduamente scrivono, ciascuno a suo modo, sulla rivista intitolata *900*'. ('Interpretazione', *900*, 21 April 1929, p. 145)

<sup>144</sup> 'Posizione', *900*, 21 February 1929, p. 50.

<sup>145</sup> *900*, 1 November 1928, pp. 122-124.

<sup>146</sup> 'Italia rurale', p. 123.

<sup>147</sup> The use of the adjective *paesana* is obviously quite polemical here. The association of *paesana* with a redefined notion of the rural, interpreted not so much agriculturally as philosophically ('[il ruralesimo] è... una filosofia, è insomma l'essenza trascendentale della vita rustica... Rurali si può essere senza avere nè una zolla nè un filo d'erba'. 'Italia rurale', p.123), opposes the *Italia paesana* presented by *900* to the more conservative and provincial "rural Italy" promoted by the *selvaggi*.

<sup>148</sup> The most conspicuous case is Curzio Malaparte: he is co-editor of the first four issues of *900*, where he publishes an article ('La Folie du Seicent Italien') and in 1927 he abandons *900* and starts writing for *Il Selvaggio*, becoming one of the fiercest *strapaesani*.

<sup>149</sup> '...non esisteva nella realtà un modello urbano come quello auspicato da *900*, come non corrispondeva all'Italia rurale la provincia degli strapaesani.' (*Le Riviste di Strapaese e Stracittà*, p.33)

<sup>150</sup> *Le riviste di Strapaese e Stracittà*, pp. 10-11.

<sup>151</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 36.

<sup>152</sup> Gianni Grana, *Le avanguardie letterarie*, 3 vols (Milano: Marzorati, 1986), II, pp. 616-617.

## Chapter 4

### ITALIAN TRADITION AND THE ETHICS OF EUROPEANISM

The periodicals *Il Baretto* and *Solaria* share, besides some of their contributors<sup>1</sup>, a quest at the same time for a return to tradition and a literary and cultural Europeanism, thereby representing, in the second half of the 1920s, an alternative to an increasingly widespread cultural nationalism. However, although *Solaria* to a certain extent continues the legacy of *Il Baretto*, the position of the two periodicals on the issues of tradition and Europeanism differs. Gobetti and the contributors of *Il Baretto*, in fact, interpret the return to tradition in ideological and moral terms as an alternative both to the nationalist appropriations and the formal excesses which had characterized the first half of the 1920s, whereas for *Solaria* the reference to tradition corresponds to the need to create the basis for future literature. In this sense, while *Il Baretto* assumes a polemical position towards *La Ronda*, *Solaria* uses -although critically- *La Ronda* as a model and absorbs its legacy. On the other hand the project for a “European” literature assumes for *Il Baretto* the character of ideological and political dissidence, whereas in *Solaria* it has, as will be seen, a more abstract and ambiguous character.

As a contributor to both periodicals Eugenio Montale’s early criticism represents a significant synthesis of their positions. While nourishing the idea of tradition as an important reference, not only in literary, but also in moral terms, he

introduces in the debate a concept of European modernity, expressed by such authors as Joyce, Proust, Svevo, Saba and presumably Montale himself, seen as the expression of a “twilight”, a crisis marked by the recognition and representation of the condition of “chaos” and pain of contemporary existence.



### *Il Baretto* and the ethical value of tradition and internationalism

Il sapore arcaico e polemico di questo nome di esule e di pellegrino preromantico [...] sottintendeva una volontà di coerenza con le tradizioni e di battaglia contro culture e letterature costrette nei limiti della provincia...  
(Piero Gobetti)

La tradizione nostra è in un tono che mi piace dire di moralità nativa...  
(Guglielmo Alberti)

Giuseppe Langella notices how within the general atmosphere of the “call for order” -both political and cultural- characterising the early 1920s the necessity is felt for the development of a notion of literary and cultural “tradition” which would be at the same time separate from the fascist attempt to present its cultural programme as the expression of the genuine Italian “spirit” and from the extremely formalized version of tradition presented by the *rondisti*, resulting in confinement to their ivory tower.<sup>2</sup> The attempt to redefine such a tradition is at the core of the cultural project of Piero Gobetti’s periodical *Il Baretto*, whose publication starts in December 1924. *Il Baretto* belongs to Gobetti’s wider cultural and editorial project started in 1918 with *Energie Nove* and continued in 1922 with *La Rivoluzione Liberale*. The function of *Il Baretto* within Gobetti’s project is to gather a wide number of intellectuals around a cultural project, which, although specifically centred on literature, should continue *La Rivoluzione Liberale*’s programme, as announced before the publication of *Il Baretto*’s first issue: ‘Avrà [*Il Baretto*] nel mondo letterario il compito della *Rivoluzione Liberale* nell’attività politica. Suscitare preoccupazioni di serietà ed esigenze di pensiero, di critica, di stile nelle nuove generazioni.’<sup>3</sup> This programme reflects a specific concept of the function of the man of letters within society. The intellectuals gathered around Gobetti’s journals are particularly concerned, in fact,

with defining their position in social as well as in cultural terms and in restoring the dignity of literary activity, which -they maintain- in Italy has been historically lost. This need is clearly expressed by Santino Caramella in an article published in *La Rivoluzione Liberale*, where, after describing the condition of the man of letters in Italy through the centuries and after comparing it with that of intellectuals in other European countries, he invokes a new figure of *letterato*, ethically committed to his activity:

Noi vogliamo [...] che lo scrittore, il letterato, [...] senta che saper scrivere, e scrivere bene, non basta : che bisogna soprattutto, nella media condizione delle lettere, essere uomini. Altrimenti, come si denuncia un malcostume politico, si dovrà denunciare un malcostume letterario : e l'onorato mestiere della penna cadrà sotto molti obbrobri, per non avere né i suoi maestri né i suoi novizi compreso, che erano socialmente parti di un organismo e dovevano adeguarsi a questa funzione - anziché vivere sulle grate norme dell'inserirsi nella storia, e della bontà del successo.<sup>4</sup>

*Il Baretti* starts its publication in December 1924.<sup>5</sup> The aim of the periodical is to support *La Rivoluzione Liberale* and to continue its political action on the cultural front. Culture is crucial, according to Gobetti, in the creation of a new liberal ruling class. In this respect Langella notices that *Il Baretti* is part of the project 'che fu sua ambizione permanente [...] di aggregare attorno alla propria iniziativa editoriale strati di intellettuali che sarebbero dovuti diventare la "nuova classe dirigente" da cui sarebbe stata rimessa in moto la rivoluzione liberale mancata nel nostro Risorgimento.'<sup>6</sup> The importance he attributes to the interaction between culture, philosophy and politics is expressed as early as 1918, when, in his periodical *Energie nove*, he claims that it is not possible 'nella vita sociale [...] prescindere dall'intima unità di letteratura, politica, filosofia, come se chi studia dovesse badare solo all'arte e la politica lasciarla ai vuoti e intriganti parolai ed inerti.'<sup>7</sup>

Besides, the creation of a periodical contained within the field of culture has the advantage of being less exposed to the threat of censorship and closure. *Il Baretto* continues therefore the programme of *La Rivoluzione Liberale* and is characterized by the same anti-fascist stance. Langella claims that ‘non è possibile cogliere il significato storico del Baretto se non attraverso una lettura che tenga continuamente presente la cronaca e l’attualità politica dei mesi immediatamente precedenti la sua comparsa’.<sup>8</sup> The months preceding the publication of *Il Baretto* are the crucial months between the Matteotti murder and the proclamation of the dictatorship, which are characterized by a weakening of Mussolini’s government and a counterattack carried out by the supporters of democracy, who try to destabilize the government by appealing to public opinion. The founding of *Il Baretto* as a cultural periodical is not, therefore, a sign of *ripiego*, but rather an intensification and an expansion of the political programme of *La Rivoluzione Liberale*, and aims at ‘intensificare, allargandola a strati intellettuali finora scarsamente coinvolti, l’offensiva contro il partito che aveva ucciso Matteotti.’<sup>9</sup>

The first issue is devoted mainly to illustrating the stance of the periodical through a series of articles aimed at contextualizing *Il Baretto*’s discourse within contemporary cultural issues and debates. The opening article by Piero Gobetti, significantly entitled *Illuminismo*, invokes the return to a concept of “enlightenment” to be opposed to ‘[le] conversioni, [i] programmi neoclassici, [gli] appelli spirituali’ which characterized the literary and critical activity of the previous generation and whose relativism and individualism led to the loss of the values of civilization and to the renunciation of the defence of literature, threatened and endangered by politics. The title itself of the periodical -*Il Baretto*- represents a precise statement, as Gobetti points out at the beginning of the article :



Il sapore arcaico e polemico di questo nome di esule e di pellegrino preromantico, annunciato quattro anni sono per titolo di una rivista di scrittori giovani che ora si pubblica, sottintendeva una volontà di coerenza con le tradizioni e di battaglia contro culture e letterature costrette nei limiti della provincia, chiuse dalle frontiere di dogmi angusti e di piccole patrie. Quegli intenti, in un nuovo clima, non ci sembrano inattuali.<sup>10</sup>

*Il Baretto* is born precisely with the intention of promoting a literary practice which should be different from that of the previous generation ; this implies the restoration of the lost dignity and decorum of Italian literature and the consolidation of specific values, in order to liberate literature from those Gobetti calls ‘i più immodesti e agili conquistatori’<sup>11</sup> and their fundamental provincialism and provide it with ‘uno stile europeo’. The redefinition of the concept of “tradition” is a crucial point in this project of the restoration of values. The rereading of Italian tradition represents the key to a European style, and it is meant to constitute an alternative to a reading of tradition which can only lead to cultural nationalism and which is used instrumentally by the ruling power. *Il Baretto*’s reading of the Italian literary tradition does not question the canon, but rather it identifies a certain Italian spirit which constitutes the essence of Italian literature throughout the centuries, in relation to the wider cultural context of European literature. Europeanism represents therefore for Gobetti’s group<sup>12</sup> not only an alternative cultural attitude and consequently a dissident political position, but also a genuine attempt to define the essence of literary “Italianness”, against any arbitrary appropriation and exploitation of the concept.

In order to be able to create a new starting point for a redefinition of the tasks of literature, it is necessary for the *barettiani* to take stock of the situation and

analyse the responsibilities of the previous generations of intellectuals, in particular of the *vocianti*. In the first issue of *Il Baretto* Natalino Sapegno and Umberto Morra Di Lavriano analyse how Croce's thought was interpreted by *La Voce*'s intellectuals and the responsibility of that famous periodical in shaping the conscience of successive generations. The importance of *La Voce*'s legacy for intellectuals in the post-war period had already been evaluated by Gobetti in *La Rivoluzione Liberale*, where he had assessed not only the value but also the shortcomings of the cultural atmosphere generated by the periodical:

Noi amiamo troppo la *Voce* vera, per non saperci distinguere e per non saper rinnegare i sogni ingenui della "Voce", che furono belli e fecondi, non per sé, ma come illusioni suscitatrici di risultati, e che oggi sono inutili, e segno di un'inquietudine malsana. [...]

Ora nella "Voce" accanto al realismo da cui è nato, poniamo, Amendola, c'era ancor troppo *Lemmonio Boreo* ed è inutile ricordarvi che *Lemmonio Boreo* è diventato con perfetta coerenza l'*Iliade* del fascismo. Quando ci si incomincia a chiedere : che fare ? bisogna proprio convincersi che si è in quella posizione di disoccupati, astratta, frammentaria, immorale, umanistica, che definisce l'*intellettuale* in Italia e presto o tardi bisognerà andarsi a ritrovare in qualche garibaldinismo o legionarismo o fascismo.<sup>13</sup>

Croce's critical method is evaluated by Sapegno in the article *Resoconto di una sconfitta*, where he outlines how, in the pre-war period, Croce failed to constitute a model for the achievement of a critical method which, precisely because of its modernity (a modernity here interpreted as the expression of a European and critical spirit), would find a link with the classical and local tradition. As such a critical method can only be achieved through continuous and assiduous study and research - Sapegno maintains- those who were supposed to pursue it -namely the *vocianti*- were incapable of following it and transformed what was meant to be a method into a series of formulae. 'Ci furono dei crociani e degli anticrociani' -Sapegno declares-



‘ma nessuno capì Croce’<sup>14</sup>: such misunderstanding constitutes the “defeat”, the generational failure mentioned in the title, and represents the starting point for the work to be carried out by the new generation. As Sapegno stresses, this failure has been ‘la più grande e profonda sconfitta della nostra adolescenza, ed è pure il punto da cui dobbiamo muovere, se sarà possibile, e progredire’<sup>15</sup>. In the literary field in particular, the retrieval of Croce’s method implies :

definire il concetto della poesia, distinguendolo accuratamente dalle altre attività umane, con le quali spesso si confonde intorbidandolo : dissipare pertanto e bandire le facili confusioni e le mescolanze arbitrarie e gli illeciti matrimoni dell’arte con la filosofia [...] determinare i limiti che l’ispirazione poetica incontra nella tradizione letteraria e linguistica [...] fissare i rapporti fra la critica e le lettere o le arti, richiamare i critici all’osservazione e allo studio degli elementi più propriamente poetici nell’opera di poesia, al di sopra o all’infuori delle suggestioni pratiche o di pensiero, comunque estranee.<sup>16</sup>

Croce’s method is therefore to be reconsidered as an interpretative instrument, particularly for its scholarly character and close adherence to the text, which to Sapegno and the *Baretti*’s group seems to be consonant with the quest for dignity in the exercise of a literature interpreted in ethical terms. Such a character of moral dignity is -almost paradoxically- achieved by exclusively concentrating on the specificity of literature, ‘al di sopra o all’infuori delle suggestioni pratiche’: in this sense the task that Sapegno envisages for his generation is the continuation of the work of such critics as the ‘*crociani*’ Serra, Gargiulo, Cecchi and of the *rondisti*, in order to retrieve and continue Croce’s legacy.

Morra Di Lavriano, in his article *La scuola della Voce*, completes Gobetti and Sapegno’s generational picture by analysing the part *La Voce* had in shaping the personalities of young intellectuals before the war and its responsibilities in creating a generation unable to understand and to deal with the implications of the war it was



supporting. Such a generation was destined to failure, and the military defeat at Caporetto represented the concrete evidence of a larger cultural failure:

Se, prese le cose all'ingrosso, si può anche dire che l'educazione vociana fu quella degli ufficiali di complemento, o dei migliori tra essi, si capisce che un mancamento generale, un fallimento, che appunto i migliori avevano già da sé previsto e scontato, era necessario. Non è davvero da far meraviglia che il disastro di Caporetto sia accaduto, ma piuttosto come noi [...] si sia retto fino a quel giorno.<sup>17</sup>

The war represented a watershed, the event that determined a cultural change of direction : Renato Serra was wrong, -Giuseppe Sciortino observes in his article *Tendenze letterarie*<sup>18</sup>- when, in his *Esame di coscienza di un letterato*, he declared that the war would not change anything. On the contrary, the war has started a new epoch, which can be defined as 'l'epoca della critica' : it has in fact promoted critical speculation, it has brought more clarity, sobriety and synthesis into the critical field and has dissipated redundant erudition. However, although the post-war period might seem favourable to the development of a new critical trend, the critics are confronted with a radically different situation and with a fundamental generational change : 'nel dopoguerra immediato' -Sciortino points out- 'siamo in un periodo in cui tutto un vecchio mondo si sfascia, irrimediabilmente ; non valgono più i certificati di vecchie appartenenze ; non è assolutamente vero che ognuno si ritrova al lavoro interrotto un giorno lontano'<sup>19</sup>, and he stresses the disappearance, by 1923, of a whole generation, to which before and during the war everybody was happy and proud to belong. In the transformed context of the post-war period a poet like D'Annunzio can no longer be the poet that represents the epoch, as he is considered, according to Sciortino, too "heavy" by the consumers of the new "pseudo-literature" ; the representative poet of the new epoch is now Guido Da Verona, 'lirico puro per eccellenza'. Another

example of the post-war cultural climate is seen by Sciortino in Giovanni Papini's conversion, as it represents on the one hand the "need to believe" and on the other a sign of the attempt at reconstruction that characterizes the period. Futurism, avant-gardism and Neo-classicism, on the other hand, show signs of obsolescence in the post-war cultural atmosphere. Once again, Benedetto Croce is seen as the only thinker and critic who has survived the post-war cultural crisis and whose thought and critical method can give Italian culture an international scope.

As the period of post-war confusion and uncertainty is coming to an end, only those artists who have been able to construct aesthetic values which are not ephemerally linked to post-war chaos have survived : it is on these artists, Sciortino concludes, that "la nuova critica" must concentrate, in particular on those who 'superano il precario -da qualcuno denominato *l'informe*- per attingere un nuovo assoluto, vale a dire forme schiettamente nuove.'<sup>20</sup> Although cautious, the opposition "informe-forma" is indicative of the aesthetic orientation of the *barettiani* : the return to form is equalled to a return to order after the "disorder" of the immediate pre-war and post-war years.

The interest in the return to form corresponds for the *barettiani* to the interest in the retrieval and reinterpretation of literary tradition. Once again (as had happened with *La Ronda* and fundamentally with all the artistic movements concerned with the post-war "return to order"), tradition is re-read and retrieved in the name of a new modernity ; in the case of *Il Baretti* it is presented as an alternative notion to that established on the one hand by the pre-war avant-garde and on the other by attempts to appropriate it on the part of fascist culture. Once again, the redefinition of tradition assumes a political connotation and is carried out in an attempt to propose a specific version of the concept of cultural "Italianness".

Guglielmo Alberti's article, entitled *Lettera d'occasione* and published in the 15 January 1925 issue under the pseudonym "Oreste" is to be read in this context. After questioning the meaning of literary tradition and what the writer can expect from such a concept, Alberti gives a definition of Italian tradition as almost "secret" in terms of models, but recognizable in the moral "tone" that characterizes it, which, although estranged, is nonetheless an identifiable feature of Italian literature :

La tradizione che possiamo dir nostra è invece segreta, tanto segreta che a volersi rifar di proposito a dei modelli, par davvero che sia fatica, non che inutile pernicioso così da far puntualmente cadere nell'esercizio retorico. La tradizione nostra è in un tono che mi piace dire di moralità nativa straniato sì che la comunità italiana difficilmente ci si può riconoscere, ma pur rampollante dalle più profonde e pure scaturigini della nostra terra - tono che c'è dato da scoprire attraverso o meglio sotto le differenze individuali.<sup>21</sup>

The powerful notion of a moral strand characterising Italian literary tradition to such an extent as to constitute its specific feature, but at the same time to prevent tradition being frozen into specific models, is used by the *barettiani* on the one hand against the fascist reappropriation of the myth of "Italianness" (by presenting a version of *italianità* other than that propagandized by what is beginning to emerge as the culture of the new regime), and on the other against the crystallisation of Italian literary tradition operated by such groups as *La Ronda*. The rethinking of tradition in these terms allows the concept of tradition to be distanced from any normative definition and to be read as a feature of Italian civilization, which enables it to be related to a wider European cultural context.

It is in the light of this revised context that the *barettiani* reread some major Italian authors: for instance in his article *Il nostro Carducci* Luca Pignato attempts a reading of Carducci which should present, in his words, 'una nuova posizione d'idee



e di gusto'<sup>22</sup>. This position questions the established view that Carducci represents the last poet of the classical tradition and that modern poetry begins with D'Annunzio and Pascoli. Carducci does not open or close a tradition, but '[risolve] la tradizione nello sbocco originale della sua poesia'<sup>23</sup>, according to a concept of tradition which can only be interpreted as "history" ('perchè in fondo la tradizione, noi crediamo, non sarà altro che la storia.'<sup>24</sup>) Only by historicizing the concept of literary tradition is it in fact possible to avoid sterile or factitious categorization and to establish the discourse in terms of form. A critical discourse focusing on form, in fact, prevents any instrumental use of aesthetic concepts. Once again the critical instruments to carry out this operation of historicization are provided by Croce's method. Once form is established as the only criterion of critical evaluation, then the critic is no longer confronted with the issue of Carducci's classicism or modernity, but rather with the distinction, in his work, between poetry and technique, between 'Carducci umanista' and 'Carducci poeta'. Since for Carducci poetry coincided with a form conceived of as technique, 'egli non aveva possibilità d'intendere nel linguaggio desanctisiano, quella forma che è la vita, il pieno esprimersi, cui nulla precede se non il caos psicologico.'<sup>25</sup> Pignato's conclusion consists in establishing an "ideal chronology" linking Carducci and Croce, so as to create a context in which the debate on form should be placed:

Cotesti equivoci, della forma che è sintesi e della forma che risulta, dall'analisi, astrazione e morte, e del sentimento che è lirica e del sentimento che è pratica, sono i problemi lasciati dal Carducci al Croce, in quella cronologia ideale che si deve stabilire se si attenda a ordinare in noi l'insegnamento della loro opera.<sup>26</sup>

Part of the programme carried out by the *barettiani*, in order to redefine the function of the man of letters in the new epoch, is the attempt to attribute to criticism a quality of dignity and self-sufficiency. This is particularly evident in the re-reading of De Sanctis carried out by Giacomo Debenedetti in the article entitled *Critica ed autobiografia*<sup>27</sup>, where the autobiographical tone underlying De Sanctis's *Studio su Giacomo Leopardi* is interpreted not as the critic's personal indulgence, but rather as a connection between the critic and the poet's existential "motives" which prompt critical understanding. De Sanctis's autobiographism, in fact, does not indulge in the evocation of the memories concerning, for instance, his encounter with Leopardi, but is used as a critical instrument. Debenedetti points out that 'tutte le biografie sono un po' delle autobiografie segrete. La loro ispirazione, la loro vera efficacia narrativa e psicologica, derivano dalla scoperta che il biografo fa dentro di sè di motivi di vita, più o meno latenti e tendenziali, che avrebbero potuto sposare la direzione di esistenza del suo eroe.'<sup>28</sup> The interconnection between criticism and autobiography, therefore, claims for the critical activity an existential value, which gives it an unprecedented dignity: the fact that De Sanctis avoids the temptation of mere autobiographism shows his faith in the self-sufficiency he attributes to the critical activity as a cognitive instrument.

The self-sufficiency and dignity of the critical activity are a central theme in the discourse promoted by *Il Baretti* in particular after Gobetti's death in January 1926. If during Gobetti's life such a sense of dignity was used to reinforce the moral and political function of literary activity, after his death this attitude becomes prominent, as it represents the only possibility for the periodical to survive as an intellectual project, against the discourse and the censorship of the fascist regime.

In his *Propositi del Baretti*, published in the 12 December 1926 issue, Santino Caramella, in charge of *Il Baretti* after Gobetti's death, once again asserts the Crocean stance of the periodical and, in particular, he stresses again the necessity of distinguishing between 'poesia' and 'letteratura', by 'poesia' meaning the result of purely theoretical and creative action and by 'letteratura' indicating works of "practical communication and diffusion" which can have links with philosophy, science, religion, politics or economics. This distinction allows the "man of letters" to be involved in the world of praxis and establishes a relationship between his "aesthetic genius" and "ethical genius" thereby reconciling his poetic self and his personality as a *letterato*. The acknowledgement of such a relationship will shed light on what Caramella calls 'vero e vivo romanticismo', expressed by a tradition of ethically engaged literature such as that of Baretti, Alfieri and their successors, and will allow the renewal of the concept of "man of letters". As the political situation does not allow the existence of a periodical unless it becomes "corrupted" right from the start, 'l'unico terreno ancora praticabile resta quello della critica letteraria, sia pure affrontata con spirito di indipendenza e come veicolo di una personale testimonianza.'<sup>29</sup> The growing interest in Croce manifested by Caramella has been explained by Langella not so much as an interest in his aesthetics 'perché anzi a questo livello i suoi principi teoretici saranno oggetto di una costante correzione'<sup>30</sup>, but rather in an image of Croce as increasingly associated with anti-fascism.<sup>31</sup>

It is under these auspices that Caramella defines the tasks of the periodical in terms both of reconstruction<sup>32</sup> and of 'frusta' :

I - Restaurare la coscienza romantica della poesia e dell'arte contemporanea nella sua giusta misura ; difendere i valori dell'Ottocento in quanto rappresentano l'equilibrio interiore dell'arte.



[...]

IV - Propugnare la serietà dell'uomo di lettere, il culto della personalità dello scrittore. Illuminare l'accordo fra questo principio etico e il principio estetico dell'arte libera e pura, spiritualmente interiore.

V - Guidare alla conoscenza degli artisti e dei poeti nuovi, e mettere a contatto più intimo la nostra cultura con le letterature straniere ; ma insieme perfezionare la contemplazione dell'antico, eliminando o rifacendo categorie storiche tradizionali e schemi di giudizio antiquati.

[...]

VII - Agire come vaglio della tradizione letteraria italiana, e discriminare la vera tradizione dalla falsa....

[...]

IX - Frustare ; con la sferza del critico e non del libellista acrimonioso ; ma frustare.<sup>33</sup>

As regards Caramella's *Propositi* Giuseppe Langella points out how it would be impossible not to notice the distance that separates this text from Gobetti's *Illuminismo*, which had started the periodical ('un orizzonte ristretto, un sipario quasi calato, una scenografia meno allettante, e soprattutto una prospettiva strategica senza sviluppo, un intreccio inesistente'<sup>34</sup>) and notices how *Il Baretti* has turned from an action review to a 'rivista di frusta'.<sup>35</sup> Caramella's resolutions, together with a critical method still largely of Crocean inspiration, are endorsed by the *barettiani* to such an extent that at times the original Europeanism of the periodical is sacrificed in the name of a rigorous notion of form, as it evident from Caramella's virulent *stroncatura* of Joyce's *Ulysses* -published in *Il Baretti* in December 1926, in the same issues as his *Propositi del Baretti*- which is very different from the analysis of Joyce's work carried out by Eugenio Montale in other periodicals the same year<sup>36</sup>:

Tutta la fama di Joyce è fondata sulla illeggibilità di *Ulysses* e sulla possibilità di sostituirlo correntemente con la lettura di *Dedalus*, dei *Dubliners*, ecc. [...] Joyce passa per un pornografo, ed è il più innocente e casto scrittore del mondo; Joyce è ritenuto un amatore di squisitezze artistiche, e invece è rozzo e inelegante in tutto il suo stile. L'enorme mole di *Ulysses*, minuzioso resoconto delle azioni, dei gesti, dei pensieri,

dei sogni di un signor Bloom qualunque, con un brillante prologo senza costruito e quarantadue pagine di vertiginoso monologo, senza un punto nè una virgola, della signora Bloom alla fine - non è un'opera d'arte. E' una congerie di finissime e sottili analisi psicologiche, di osservazioni micrometriche e microscopiche sopra il più comune e ordinario piccolo borghese che si possa immaginare; ma la sintesi non c'è.<sup>37</sup>

In the 12 December 1926 issue Paolo Flores's *Richiesta di una critica* defines the critical task in ethical terms as strictly linked to a concept of art as the manifestation of man in his totality. The critical act should therefore be carried out for the sake of understanding and cognition rather than judgement and categorization. The ethicality of critical activity is reclaimed, not as a return to the old formulae dismissed by Croce's criticism, but rather as a critical revision of idealist criticism. Such a revisionist reading would create the basis for a new attitude in criticism:

E' [...] evidente che di moralità e di logica non si riparla qui nel vecchio senso delle precettistiche retoriche, ma proprio in quel nuovo senso più vivo e moderno che a quelle parole ha conferito la filosofia idealistica. Questa nei suoi ardori di rinnovamento ha polemizzato efficacemente al fine di dare al concetto dell'arte una piena autonomia, la funzione di una forma, di un'attività fondamentale dello spirito ; ora che quell'opera di polemica si è conclusa con l'istaurazione di una nuova mentalità filosofica, non bisogna chiudersi nelle formule consacrate e imporsi un nuovo dogmatismo, per paura di vecchi fantasmi.<sup>38</sup>

Flores invokes a criticism which should be detached from the aesthetic hedonism and agnosticism which have always characterized critical activity and would tend towards a commitment to both reason and sensibility. Russian literature, pervaded as it is with "moral passions", is taken by Flores as an example of art which calls for a criticism capable of comprehending ample philosophical systems and of developing a concept of aesthetics removed from 'il vecchio concetto edonistico dell'arte come giuoco'. Flores's "request" is for criticism to retain its philosophical



and cognitive character, against the degeneration of idealist criticism into pure contemplation, and for it in particular, to retain an element of ethicality which can only be acknowledged as a function of criticism insofar as the work of art is conceived of as a spiritual whole: as art participates in what he calls ‘quel processo di autoeducazione che è la libera vita dello spirito’, criticism ‘non può misconoscere questa verità senza rinunciare al proprio carattere filosofico e votarsi a un’eterna e vana contemplazione del miracolo dell’arte’<sup>39</sup>.

Langella notices how Flores’s notion of criticism -interrelating aesthetics and ethics- might seem contradictory in the light of the constant reference to Croce which characterizes the second phase of *Il Baretto*. Croce’s distinction between art on the one hand and logics, ethics and economics on the other is in fact accepted ; however, these categories are then found organically reunited in the work of art. Langella’s reading of this apparent contradiction is that Croce’s notion of the autonomy of art is reinterpreted by Flores more as *autoctisi* than autonomy<sup>40</sup> :

L’“autonomia” sorge a livello di produzione, di “attività” di manifestazione dello spirito, il quale si esprime, si realizza in un’opera d’arte piuttosto che in un altro modo, e senza obbedire ad alcun condizionamento esterno. “Autoctisi” suggerisce appunto questa connotazione genetica : è il riferimento ad un intellettuale che non può trovare altri canali per consistere se non quello della letteratura, e che quindi si riduce a scrittore. Tuttavia, pur manifestandosi quale uomo parziale, “autoctono”, letterato, l’uomo di cultura, per i barettoni resta sempre uomo totale, e morale, quale che ne sia l’azione esplicata.<sup>41</sup>

Flores’s use of the example of Russian literature as offering an occasion to rethink and revise the function of criticism reasserts the importance of the periodical’s internationalism as the key to the definition of Italian culture. In this sense is to be read Caramella’s short piece *Frusta e Fiera*, published in the same issue, in which, after once again he declares the *barettoni*’s intention to be ‘gli



Aristarchi Scannabue della odierna cultura italiana e straniera'<sup>42</sup> and criticizes the periodical *La Fiera Letteraria* for the fundamental provincialism of its contributors.<sup>43</sup> The question which concludes the piece ('Forse perchè in Italia non c'è altro che provincia?') reasserts the ethical value of cultural Europeanism as opposed to the provincialism of contemporary Italian culture.

Such a specific notion of Europeanism is certainly at the basis of *Il Baretto's* assessment of Bontempelli's *novecentismo*. The development of that movement through the periodical *900* is in fact followed with interest by the *barettiani* on account of its project of the creation of a literature for a new modernity and its tendency towards Europeanism. However, from the beginning of its publication, *900's* Europeanism is accused by Caramella of provincialism<sup>44</sup>, since the Italian contributors to *900* are defined too "second rate" (as opposed to the prominent European contributors) to promote and produce a literature of real European scope and since the theoretical basis of *novecentismo* is considered too weak and contradictory to sustain its ambitious project. *900's* ambition to constitute itself as an expression of Europeanism is dismissed in the name of a different notion of Europeanism, interpreted as the understanding of the relations that link the literatures of different countries in Europe and as the need to analyse one's national literature within a wider context, beyond any nationalist position and with a constant critical attitude. Such a notion underpins Cajumi's extremely negative evaluation of the *900* project, which stresses again the substantial difference between *900* and *Il Baretto's* concepts of literary Europeanism :

Che cos'è dunque questo *novecentismo* se non la mania di rinnovamento ad oltranza che si è impadronita di personalità diversissime? I loro sofismi teorici, l'affermazione che il mondo comincia negli ultimi giorni del luglio 1914 [...] non stanno in piedi per un istante. Il loro

“europeismo” (da non confondersi con il nostro, aspirazione a una cultura vasta e bene inquadrata, a delle indagini continue, diffuse e comprensive, a quella dignità di intendimenti e di costumi intellettuali che mettono i rapporti fra i letterati delle varie nazioni sullo stesso piano di libera, cortese e reciproca curiosità) è quello [...] del provinciale che corre alle *Folies-Bergère* la sera stessa in cui scende a Parigi. [...] I *novecentisti* sono degli irregolari, degli sradicati, dei cattivi romantici nel senso che non reagiscono neppure - come gli altri fecero - alle tradizioni dirette, concrete.<sup>45</sup>

900's “rinnovamento” is therefore opposed to *Il Baretto's* “modernità” and the key contextual element in this process of redefinition of “the new” is *Il Baretto's* ethical reinterpretation of the concept of Europeanism. Such an ethical concept underpins the *barettiani's* critique of the intensely nationalistic new cultural climate and is at the basis of the dismissal, on the part of Caramella, of the *Strapaese/Stracittà* dispute, on the ground that there is no real distinction between the two movements, as ‘nessuno è più impomatato, e azzimato secondo l'ultima moda, degli abitanti di *Strapaese* ; e nessuno più degli elegantoni di *Stracittà* è pregno di goffa malizia paesana’<sup>46</sup> ; the dispute is judged as completely factitious, like the old disputes ‘fra gli adoratori degli antichi e i fautori dei moderni, fra i puristi e neologisti, fra i classicisti e romantici, fra i carducciani e i manzoniani’<sup>47</sup>, in a moment when the appropriation of such concepts as tradition and modernity in the literary field is to be carried out on more serious grounds than a sterile and fundamentally superficial dispute. The critique of the discourse chosen by movements attempting to create an identity for fascist culture implies a criticism of how such a discourse in effect deforms such notions as “national” and “international”. The same critique of the mystification pervading fascist cultural circles is expressed in the 1928 editorial article *Ottimismo e autoincensamento*, which constitutes a defence of the pessimism that characterizes *Il Baretto* against the



general optimism manifested by writers in the new cultural climate. The role of such a periodical as *Il Baretto* is to keep a critical distance from the fundamental ambiguity of this atmosphere of cultural euphoria :

Vi è infatti nei più dei letterati d'oggi una tale abitudine di autoincensamento, una tale soddisfazione per la grandezza letteraria della patria (che s'intende, è tutt'una cosa con la propria grandezza), che non resta, a chi voglia serbare la propria indipendenza di giudizio se non opporre una naturale diffidenza. [...] Il *Baretto* di fronte a un popolo di scrittori "pieno di tante fortune", così beatamente soddisfatto di sé, è costretto a chiedersi se tanta fretta nel lodare l'opera propria (poiché è evidente che quando questi scrittori parlano dell'Italia, pensano soprattutto a se stessi) non venga dalla preoccupazione segreta, che di essa ben poco potranno dire gli uomini che verranno...<sup>48</sup>

The critique of the identification between writers and nation is conducted on the basis of an interpretation of literary nationalism as, in fact, a projection of the writers' literary self. What the *barettiani* seem not to realise is that it is precisely the redefinition of the concept of "nation" which shapes the intellectual identity of their contemporaries and that their literary self is strictly interrelated with such a notion, which they are trying to redefine in their own terms.

The same intransigent awareness of the critics' responsibility in shaping the literary identity of a nation underlies the various analyses of the contemporary literary scene carried out by *Il Baretto's* contributors (Arrigo Cajumi in particular) between 1927 and 1928. In his *Sagome di contemporanei* (July 1927) Cajumi analyses the literary and critical profiles of Emilio Cecchi, Francesco Flora and Curzio Malaparte and evaluates the impact of their work on contemporary culture.

Although Cecchi's critical work is accused of lacking historical perspective, the compensating factor that redeems Cecchi's criticism is his honesty of judgement, his critical precision which opposes any form of intellectual approximation and the



“discretion” (‘sembra che egli sia venuto alle lettere per applicarvi questo precetto guicciardiniano’) which he applies to his work. Nonetheless, these critical qualities are not enough to make him belong to the category of those Cajumi calls ‘i critici classici’: Cecchi is in fact considered a “romantic” critic, the difference between the categories being that the “romantic” critics ‘non lavorano ad assestare i valori letterari antichi e nuovi, a spiegarli, a illustrarli, bensì a scoprire a divulgare la poesia’.<sup>49</sup> The distinction between “critici classici” and “critici romantici” stresses the difference between a criticism concerned with the analysis of “values” and one whose interest lies in discovery and divulgation; Cecchi’s criticism is seen as shifting between the two and his writing a mixture of criticism and art. His lack of balance is attributed to the constant labour and difficult elaboration of his work; he is therefore defined as an ‘essayist’<sup>50</sup> belonging to the same tradition as Swift and Lamb.

As far as Francesco Flora is concerned, not only does his critical work (Cajumi refers in particular to his 1921 study *Dal romanticismo al futurismo*) lack any literary, historical or psychological analysis, but his novel *Città Terrena* (1927) is an example of the most decadent form of *dannunzianesimo*. In fact, Cajumi stresses, Flora’s novel would not be worth mentioning at all, if it did not represent a conspicuous example of that literary provincialism against which *Il Baretto* was strenuously fighting, which promoted bad taste and worse literary practice and should therefore be pointed out as an example not to follow.

In spite of his political position, Curzio Malaparte receives a much better treatment; Malaparte’s call for a return to “la tradizione paesana” is judged favourably, as, apart from the political differences, it is seen to be in tune with the cultural programme of *Il Baretto*: ‘fabbricare la nuova letteratura e demolire la

vecchia e sciupata'.<sup>51</sup> Cajumi, almost paradoxically, looks favourably at Malaparte's anti-Europeanism, against a notion of Europeanism defined as 'l'imitazione pedestre dei gruppi e delle chiesuole francesi, tedesche o inglesi -e magari spagnuole-d'avanguardia.'<sup>52</sup> Moreover, Cajumi seems not to be able to resist Malaparte's Tuscan persona ('la sua è letteratura toscana, un po' sbracata, ma forte, non rifiutabile da chi vada in traccia di maschilità in un mondo di critici e d'autori "scoglioniati"'<sup>53</sup>) and defines him fundamentally as a 'fenomeno curioso, ma sano'.

In a successive article entitled *La crisi del romanzo*<sup>54</sup> Cajumi analyses the crisis affecting the genre of the novel in Italy, taking up an anonymous article which had appeared in *La Fiera Letteraria*. The reason given in that article for such a crisis was that, although there is a strong presence in Italy of great writers for the "letterati" (D'Annunzio, for example), what is missing is that category of 'divulgatori secondari e leggibili dalla massa' which normally promotes an increase in book production. Cajumi takes the argument further, observing that there are, in fact, 'autori di secondo piano', but that they are such that the public prefers reading their foreign counterparts. These Italian writers are falling behind as compared to foreign authors, who can offer what the market requires, which is 'qualcosa di nuovo o di meglio rifinito'. Once he has established that what is needed is a literature able to satisfy the requests of the market, Cajumi calls for an 'opera di graduale svecchiamento', involving not only the writers, but also the critics, who should participate in the divulgation of foreign literature and transform themselves in 'informatori e specialisti', thereby superseding the old notion of the literary critic 'che sa la propria lingua e biascica il francese'<sup>55</sup>. Specialized attention to foreign production should be accompanied, Cajumi observes, by equal attention to the Italian classics, so as to alternate 'Huxley a Leopardi e Foscolo a Mauriac'. The important phenomenon that

determines such a need to revise and renew the genre of the novel is identified by Cajumi in the increasing importance acquired in society by “the masses”, by which he means a bourgeois public whose taste and values can modify market tendencies. In fact, while the regular readers of “serious” books (that is history and critical essays) are in Italy not more than five hundred or a thousand and they are in Cajumi’s words “well-behaved” (‘una minoranza che si comporta abbastanza bene’), the majority of Italian readers are followers of the so-called ‘letteratura amena’, and writers and critics should take into account the power of such readership. ‘L’americanizzazione di molti strati sociali non è stata da noi punto studiata’<sup>56</sup>, Cajumi observes, and he notices that most writers are still constructing their characters according to criteria which are at least a hundred years old. Although he stresses the importance of creating a literature rooted in the national tradition, he nonetheless acknowledges in contemporary trends the signs of fundamental changes in mentality which, he maintains, should not be neglected.<sup>57</sup>

The acknowledgement of new elements in determining the prevailing literary taste is a function of the redefinition of literary modernity: the war has in fact marked the beginning of an epoch whose taste is no longer represented by pre-war great authors and literary tendencies. Significant, in this respect, is Mario Lamberti’s article *La sensibilità di D’Annunzio*<sup>58</sup>: if Giuseppe Sciortino had already pointed out in 1925 that D’Annunzio was ‘troppo pesante’ and could therefore be no longer defined as “the poet of the epoch”<sup>59</sup>, Lamberti points out that D’Annunzio’s world collapsed after the *Laudi* and the content of his poetry was therefore too distant from modern sensibilities and only apparently close to contemporary problems. D’Annunzio, Lamberti claims, ‘è moderno, vedremo come sia solcato persino da



quell'ansia irrequieta e romantica che è il segno della nostra epoca, eppure non è la nostra modernità: non ci interessa.'<sup>60</sup>

Santino Caramella's reflections in his 1928 review of Julien Benda's controversial book *La Trahison des Clercs* seems to represent a significant summary of *Il Baretti's* activity. Benda's work is in fact analysed by Caramella in the light of the contemporary cultural situation in Italy. Once again, a foreign work is the occasion for speculation on the situation of Italian culture and Caramella identifies in Benda's book a specific issue pertaining to Italian contemporary culture, that is the problem of the ethics of literature. Caramella's comment on *La Trahison* assumes a polemical tone, as he identifies the problematic intrinsic to the phenomenon described as "betrayal" on the part of writers -namely their abandonment of disinterested intellectual activity in favour of the pursuit of political or nationalistic aims- as a moral problem. He observes that the problem at the core of the intellectuals' tendency to abandon their role as 'demolitori e flagellatori dei *monstra* incombenti sull'umanità'<sup>61</sup> lies in the moral freedom intellectuals apply to their involvement in social and political activities. It is precisely the absence of this moral freedom, of this ethical aspect in the intellectuals' work which, according to Caramella, constitutes the real "betrayal" on the part of the *clerics*:

Il nodo sta nella libertà morale con cui lo scrittore, qualunque sia il genere dei suoi rapporti spirituali con il tempo suo, pone a se stesso la responsabilità di prendere posizione nel mondo della pratica e conserva ed esercita con grande scrupolo la sua capacità di distinguere i valori dai fatti, l'universale dal particolare, la poesia e la filosofia dall'azione [...] Di necessità è richiesta [...] quell'indipendenza di giudizio che solo può dare il pensiero, e in cui si sviluppa la libertà spirituale [...] Qui sta il tradimento, nell'aver mancato e nel mancare degli scrittori verso se stessi. I quali doveri si rispettano tanto nell'essere contrari quanto nell'essere favorevoli alle tendenze preponderanti nella vita, purché si

stia pro o contro per ragioni proprie e d'indole spirituale, in seguito a una libera e responsabile decisione.<sup>62</sup>

The ethicality of the literary activity can therefore be considered as the thread to be found throughout *Il Baretti's* project, informing its rereading of tradition and its quest for Europeanism. A conclusive summary of the essence of the relationship tradition/Europe in *Il Baretti* can be offered by the following comment by Cristina Benussi:

L'invito a guardare al di fuori della penisola per capire quali siano le istanze etiche e filosofiche che stanno così radicalmente modificando i capisaldi gnoseologici, la coscienza di aver varcato i confini di una nuova epoca [...] permettono al *Baretti* di continuare in una nuova prospettiva il confronto con quanto veniva producendosi in un'Europa libera: se l'apertura iniziale alle contemporanee esperienze straniere era dettata anche dalla volontà di accostarsi a chi altrove [...] in qualche modo poteva offrire gli strumenti più adatti a ricucire i lembi della frattura tra passato e presente, si capisce come Europa e tradizione italiana [...] potessero essere due direzioni da percorrere.<sup>63</sup>

**Eugenio Montale's critical essays in the 1920s : tradition, Europeanism and the  
"painful" mark of modernity**

Lo stile ci verrà dal buon costume  
(*Il Baretti*, 15 January 1925)

Eugenio Montale's critical activity in the 1920s can be considered part of the project of redefining of the key notions of tradition and modernity which is at the core of the critical debate carried out in the major literary periodicals in those years. A close analysis of Montale's critical production in the Twenties reveals his acute awareness of problems connected with the redefinition of such concepts as tradition, modernity and *classicità*. For Montale these specific notions are particularly problematic, as their treatment from the point of view of literary criticism is strictly related to reflections on his own poetic activity. Montale's critical activity in the Twenties, therefore, often presents itself more as an act of reflection on specific critical problems than a mere evaluation of contemporary literary production : reviewing a book<sup>64</sup> is, in fact, often an occasion for him to speculate on larger issues concerning the nature and function of critical activity and the definition of certain literary concepts. As a consequence, Montale's criticism questions, to a certain extent, established criteria of critical analysis, in particular of idealist criticism: in fact, although always acknowledging his debt to Croce's aesthetics, his assessment of contemporary literature, in particular European literature, throughout the Twenties becomes increasingly distant from the methodology of idealist criticism, as he comes into contact with a modernity whose irreconcilable contradictions and lacerations he confronts and explores in his critical work. The encounter with such a modernity



raises questions about certain critical methods and requires a revision of established aesthetic criteria. One of Montale's main contributions to the critical field in the 1920s consists of identifying of a notion of modernity specifically defined in European terms. His discovery and promotion of Svevo's work and its contextualization within the larger scope of European literature exemplifies Montale's tendency to acknowledge the existence of a specific category of literary modernity, whose characteristics go beyond national boundaries and represent a recognizable feature of international contemporary culture. The expression of such a modernity at a literary level is particularly congenial to Montale's perception of the contemporary cultural atmosphere. In a letter to Svevo -written in March 1926- he declares, with reference to Valéry Larbaud's presumed Joycean influence, that the form chosen by Larbaud is only partially Joycean and rather depends on his belonging to a type of *Homo europaeus* whom Montale 'vagheggia'<sup>65</sup>. The essence of this "European modernity", whose literary expression Montale recognises in such authors as Svevo, Joyce, Larbaud, Saba, Ungaretti, Valéry, is perceived, as it emerges from Montale's critical essays, as a fundamentally "chaotic" and "painful" condition: it is referred to in terms of 'complicata pazzia contemporanea', 'arbitrio', 'devastazione', 'caos', 'crepuscolo'; the world which produces such a modernity is 'un mondo sconvolto e distrutto'; the man who inhabits this world is a 'novissimo Ulisse' whose loss of metaphysical points of reference is described as 'ateismo sorridente e disperato'. However, as Guido Mazzoni points out, Montale is fundamentally a classicist, as he 'impone un limite al talento individuale o alla mimesi del presente, contrariamente a quanto avviene sia nelle tendenze neoromantiche o simboliste, sia nelle avanguardie storiche. Come scrittore, egli rimane vincolato a un repertorio di forme già date e alle possibilità di sviluppo che

esse consentono...'<sup>66</sup> For this reason, his critical work is problematic, always oscillating between following established criteria of formal order and acknowledging the totalizing character of modern chaos.

Montale's conception of European modernity -as it develops in his critical writings in the 1920s- is in tune with *Il Baretto's* Europeanism<sup>67</sup>, since it originates from a cultural formation and critical attitude which represent an alternative to those generating contemporary attempts to redefine and appropriate the concept of modernity according to national (and nationalistic) criteria, which aim at establishing versions of specifically "Italian modernity". However, Montale's speculation on the nature of modernity is strictly interrelated with his reflections on the definition of literary tradition. As Umberto Carpi notices, in fact, in Montale the analysis of modernity in literature is carried out in the name of tradition and aims to achieve clarity and order : 'solo in un ordine, per quanto nuovo, può essere salvata, come affermazione di fondamentale fede nella razionalità e al di là di ogni impossibile conservatorismo, la tradizione'.<sup>68</sup> For this reason his critical approval goes to an art which manages to encapsulate modern chaos in structural order. In his 1923 essay on Emilio Cecchi, for instance, he praises Cecchi's understanding of 'quella poesia di nudi rapporti e di chiuse riflessioni sulla propria astratta materia, che tende a una architettura e ad una concretezza supreme, e riesce all'ordine più rigido a traverso l'arbitrio e la devastazione [...] Per far nomi Valéry in Francia e da noi Ungaretti ; qualche cosa di Cardarelli.'<sup>69</sup> Again, in 1930, reviewing Sergio Solmi's *Il pensiero di Alain* he expresses appreciation for Solmi's definition of the paradoxicality of Alain and Valéry's classicism, a classicism which 'fondandosi sulle insanabili contraddizioni del pensiero moderno risolve in immagini della più splendida e

rigorosa evidenza formale la materia più vaga e sfuggente, gioco di relazioni colte su di un mondo sconvolto e distrutto, echi del caos.’<sup>70</sup>

The essay which starts his collaboration with *Il Baretto* in January 1925, entitled *Stile e tradizione*, is meant to have a programmatic character in terms of the cultural project of the periodical and, at the same time, to clarify and redefine some crucial issues in what is considered to be a new cultural context, as opposed not only to that of the pre-war, but also of the immediate post-war period.

An important issue outlined by Montale in *Stile e tradizione* is the necessity not so much for originality, but for a critical activity which, although innovative, should, to some extent, be anchored to pre-established criteria of evaluation. Croce’s method seems to offer guidance for the formulation of these criteria: nonetheless, such a method, Montale argues, prompts the critic to consider his work as a judgement on his time and to act as the ‘giustiziere’ of his epoch. ‘Mancanza di prospettiva, passioni e accidenti individuali’, Montale argues, ‘ci creano ostacoli da ogni lato. Nei nostri inventari e bilanci di coltura, nei moti che ci persuadono a erigere in leggi e in imperativi i nostri estri più incontrollabili, noi non sappiamo quanto sia di capriccio e quanto di verità.’<sup>71</sup> In such a difficult context the act of redefining tradition has a particular significance, as it assumes the function of creating a theoretical point of reference. The concept of tradition, however, is not to be interpreted as ‘un morto peso di schemi, di leggi estrinseche e di consuetudini’ but as ‘un intimo spirito, un genio di razza, una consonanza con gli spiriti più costanti espressi dalla nostra terra.’<sup>72</sup> Montale claims that ‘non continua chi vuole la tradizione, ma chi può, talora chi meno lo sa’<sup>73</sup>: for this reason it is not possible to reduce the concept of tradition to a specific model or set of rules. In this sense the recognition of a specific cultural tradition corresponds to the need to establish a link not only between the past and the



present, but also between intellectual activity and the public. For this reason, a normative notion of tradition is replaced by a concept of tradition identified with a cultural common ground which should link the writer and his public : the myths that characterized the pre-war and immediate post-war years are therefore rejected in favour of those mythologies which, at least, are rooted in the past and in history. As Montale states, ‘al furore relativistico o attualistico è ben sicuro che anteporremo lo splendore cattolico. Al desiderio di frontiere troppo vaste, di cieli troppo distanti, porremo innanzi il confine del nostro paese, la lingua della nostra gente.’<sup>74</sup> The choice of using such a language, rooted in a specific cultural tradition, should be prompted by the awareness that Italian writers are detached from the people, which devalues both their function and that of their work and forces them to assume an attitude of elitism. The task writers should set for themselves is to create

un tono, di una lingua d’intesa che ci leghi alla folla per cui si lavora, inascoltati [...], la creazione di un centro di risonanza che permetta alla poesia di tornare ancora a costituire il decoro e il vanto del nostro paese, e non più una solitaria vergogna individuale.<sup>75</sup>

The retrieval of a language and a culture rooted in the Italian tradition is strictly correlated to the necessity of reclaiming a dignity for art, against the ‘gran disprezzo dell’arte’ manifested by ‘i poeti [che] hanno perduta la fiducia nelle parole’ and ‘i critici che [...] si raccomandano quando alla provvidenza, quando a pretesti freudiani e einsteniani’<sup>76</sup> :

Un primo dovere potrebb’essere dunque nello sforzo verso la semplicità e la chiarezza, a costo di sembrare poveri. In Italia non esiste quasi, forse non esisterà mai, una letteratura civile, colta e popolare insieme, questa manca come e perché manca una Società mezzana, un abito, un giro di consuetudine non volgari : come a dire un diffuso benessere e comfort intellettuale senza cime ma senza vaste bassure. Così è mestieri lavorare

in solitudine, e per pochi : di fronte non è che grossezza, e non solo quella borghese, ma quell'altra verniciata di cultura e di sufficienza.<sup>77</sup>

In such a context as the contemporary one, which seems to be characterized 'dall'immediata utilizzazione della cultura, dal polemismo e dalle diatribe',<sup>78</sup> Montale claims that it is necessary to abandon the pursuit of the 'stile totale' which characterized 'i poeti dell'ultima illustre triade, malati di furori giacobini, superomismo, messianismo ed altre bacature',<sup>79</sup> and to concentrate on creating a concept of style based on an ethical notion of "genius" as 'pazienza' together with 'coscienza e onestà'. 'Lo stile' he concludes 'ci verrà dal buon costume',<sup>80</sup>.

Montale's reflection on literary tradition presents a complex interrelation with his approach to modernity. His analysis of Svevo's work is a significant example of the somewhat difficult development of his interpretation of modernity and his contradictory relationship with it, as Svevo is seen as the major Italian representative of that modernity whose specific feature is its European dimension. It is precisely this quality of Svevo's modernity that is particularly consonant with Montale's notion of *homo europaeus*, although the analysis of such an artistic modernity represents a critical challenge, as it requires the critic to relinquish any pre-conceived criteria of judgement and to constantly review the function of his work. As it has been observed by Giuseppe Nava, such authors as Joyce, Gide, Larbaud -to whom Svevo should be added- become catalysts for the internal contradictions posed by the coexistence within Montale of a Crocean background and his encounter with 'la letteratura della crisi'. According to Nava, such contradictions are nourished by Montale's attempt to 'comporre il senso della tradizione e rigore dello stile con la scomposizione dell'io e la crisi dell'identità'<sup>81</sup>. He maintains that

i comuni nemici del superomismo dannunziano e del naturalismo positivistico fungono da provvisori catalizzatori d'una difficile, contraddittoria coesistenza tra eticità neoidealistica, fondata pur sempre sull'integrità dell'io e sul teleologismo della storia, e letteratura della crisi, che quella integrità e quel teleologismo nega : antideterminismo e antisoggettivismo, sia pure di segno diverso, s'incontrano nell'avversione alla causalità e al prometeismo.<sup>82</sup>

Montale's first essay on Italo Svevo, entitled *Omaggio a Italo Svevo*, published in the periodical *L'Esame* in the November-December 1925 issue, presents Svevo as a "modern" writer, whose characteristic of *contemporaneità* is not based on programmatic assumptions, but on the desire to go beyond phenomenal appearances and analyse the obscure and unrevealed depths of the human being, a desire which situates his work within contemporary European literature. It is precisely this character of "European modernity", Montale observes, which prevented Svevo's work from being understood when his first two novels were first published, as the Italian literary arena was dominated on the one hand by 'l'estetica del superuomo frainteso, dello stilismo, del bizantinismo' and on the other by 'puristi in ritardo, manzoniani falliti, "spiritualisti" senza gusto'<sup>83</sup>. Although Montale acknowledges *La coscienza di Zeno* to be Svevo's most vast and significant book, 'il poema della nostra complicata pazzia contemporanea' and 'uno dei migliori libri nostri degli ultimi anni', nonetheless, it is not Svevo's most perfect book. What its modernity has not achieved is, in fact, formal "order": '...noi sappiamo rendere omaggio alle ragioni dell'arte caotica e *totaliste*' -Montale declares- 'Ma siamo certi che dal caos si debba ormai riuscire ad una scelta, ad un ordine che per essere "nuovo" non deve apparire meno rigido e severo.'<sup>84</sup>

Such an author as Svevo is therefore problematic in critical terms, precisely because of the disconcerting quality of modernity of his work, which requires a



reflection on the adequacy of the critical criteria used to evaluate it. The necessity for such a critical self-reflection is evident in the second of Montale's essays on Svevo, *Presentazione di Italo Svevo*<sup>85</sup>, where after stressing once again the character of modernity in Svevo's novels (and the "European" character of such modernity), Montale proceeds to define the "modern novel" as a novel which is not to be described as containing a series of fragments that correspond to certain aesthetic notions, but whose artistic value lies in its totality, as an organic whole, in which 'la nostra vita di tutti i giorni possa riconoscersi con immediata rispondenza'.<sup>86</sup> The definition of the "modern" novel in these terms is condensed by Montale into the description of it as 'il libro che si può accettare senza il correttivo di una continua tara, e che non s'interpreta, non si commenta, non si risolve in "lirica pura", che non addita personaggi-simbolo e non pretende di imporre sistemi di vita sbalorditivi'<sup>87</sup> and whose models are the great European novels. A proper evaluation of this modernity (and of Svevo's modernity in particular), however, defies "traditional" instruments of critical analysis. As Montale's critical activity always implies a reflection on the nature and function of criticism, he is aware of this impasse, to such an extent that he is impelled to declare:

Infine, e se questa non è critica tanto peggio per la critica, diremo che con cotesti libri nasce in una letteratura che ha dato grandi creatori, ma è barbara e provinciale negli scrittori di fondo e, diciamo così, di collegamento, il libro rappresentativo di pochi uomini civili e responsabili, che possono fare a meno, quando lo vogliono, di estetismi, drammatismi ed altre ubbie importate importate in Italia troppo tardi ; che possono lasciarsi addietro qualche volta il "sano odor della terra" e la "fedeltà" locale, per riconoscersi in un documento della propria vita, espresso in forme poco o punto letterarie, ma esatte e senza sbavature.<sup>88</sup>

'E se questa non è critica tanto peggio per la critica' : Montale realizes that a certain modernity escapes traditional criteria of critical judgement -in particular of

idealist criticism- and indeed those criteria are rendered inappropriate by the treatment of such modern literary production as Svevo's. Montale acknowledges the profound value of Svevo's work, in particular of *La coscienza di Zeno*, as it represents 'l'apporto della nostra letteratura a quel gruppo di libri ostentatamente internazionali che cantano l'ateismo sorridente e disperato del novissimo Ulisse : l'uomo europeo'.<sup>89</sup> *La coscienza* is therefore considered Svevo's masterpiece for its capacity to express the contemporary *zeitgeist*<sup>90</sup>, but precisely because it is such a pregnant expression of modernity such a novel can be real critical material only for those critics whose method is "purposely decentred" and who are therefore best equipped to deal with such modernity, 'quei critici penetranti e volutamente privi d'ogni centro e d'ogni metodo -un Chestov, soprattutto, o un Pound...'<sup>91</sup> Traditional and rigorous criteria of critical evaluation, which Montale considers not yet outdated (those he calls 'esigenze rigorose, tradizionali, e [...] quasi [...] maupassantiane'<sup>92</sup>), in fact, still require *Senilità* to be considered as the most perfect of Svevo's books. However, Montale is fully aware that chaotic modernity defies critical order and in an article on Charles Du Bos's *Approximations* declares that

l'esperienza artistica in atto sopravanza in ogni tempo le teorie che pretendono inquadrarla ; e [...] forme di critica atte ad assecondare nel suo impulso tale esperienza, senza superarla forse, ma certo senza ostacolarla nel suo corso, sono assolutamente preferibili a quelle forme, più sistematiche e ferme, che siano scadute [...] all'ufficio di falserighe e di formule consacrate.<sup>93</sup>

In spite of such awareness, Montale's definition of *Senilità* as Svevo's most perfect novel, as opposed to the depth and complexity of *La coscienza*, is constant throughout the Twenties: although having claimed in a 1927 letter to Svevo that he has definitively "converted" to *Zeno*<sup>94</sup>, in his *Ultimo addio* -published in 1928 after



Svevo's death- he still defines *La coscienza di Zeno* as the expression of a Svevo 'più complesso e sciolto', while *Senilità* is still considered as 'il libro più perfetto di Svevo'<sup>95</sup>.

Montale's 1926 essay on Umberto Saba once more reveals Montale's interest in defining the relationship between modernity and tradition in contemporary poetry. As with Svevo, the analysis of such a problematic author like Saba offers Montale the occasion to reflect on the nature both of poetic creation and of critical activity: in particular, Montale is once again concerned with the placing of the modern poet with reference to a canonical tradition and how this tradition is to be defined. In reviewing Saba's *Figure e canti* (1926) Montale refers to Debenedetti's comment that 'ricostruire, organizzare per sé una materia musicale orecchiata nei massimi poeti, è, si direbbe, tra i primi moti di Saba verso la poesia.'<sup>96</sup> Debenedetti's abstract reference to the "classics" or 'i massimi poeti', although defined by Montale as '[un modo] scolastico e programmatico [...] di riferirsi a un'estrinseca autorità dell'ottimo poetare'<sup>97</sup>, nonetheless elicits a reflection on the position of Saba with reference to the "so-called" tradition, often presented by critics as something 'gelido e immoto', an abstract canon with no apparent contact with the reality of modern poetic production. Once he has established that in Saba's poetry no recognizable stylistic descent from "the classics" is traceable, Montale wonders what such a "classical" resonance can be ascribed to, not only in Saba's slightly naive and almost "musical" classicism, but also 'in qualsiasi lirico fortemente impegnato in quel travaglio espressivo e critico, ch'è l'unica nobiltà rimasta alla nostra vocazione di scrittori in ogni senso contemporanea'<sup>98</sup>. His interpretation is that some modern poetry is characterized by what can be called a *sui generis*, almost paradoxical classicism, which expresses itself in two fundamental ways: one which achieves what Montale



calls ‘una arrotatura’, ‘un cristallo’, resulting from “spatial” and “temporal” accumulation, which is to say from long reflection, excavation and refinement; the other which is almost unaware of itself, more simple, more natural, more human, if compared to the first one which is more abstract and almost metaphysical. Not only does this scission, Montale argues, belong to modern poetry, but it is intrinsic to the poet’s soul, to such an extent that it would be possible to write a history of poetry based on the ‘instabile adeguazione, sempre difettiva e sempre ricomposta, dello spirito della lirica e delle sue forme.’<sup>99</sup> Umberto Saba’s poetry, especially in his *Canzoniere*, belongs to the second type of classicism : it can be called a ‘classicismo ingenuo’, although not entirely lacking in awareness, as, Montale notices, ‘oggi [...] ogni parola è dolorosamente pregnante di sottintesi e di storia’.<sup>100</sup> Since in Saba’s poetry the formal legacy of the past dissolves in a series of distant echoes, such a poetry is emblematic of all modern poetry and of its relationship with literary tradition :

E’ la grande cometa della tradizione formale, diciamo meglio quella della Convenzione, che proietta, nel disciogliersi, in questo nostro crepuscolo, le sue formule meglio consacrate dal tempo e più riluttanti a corrompersi nell’ora della disgregazione. Il vasto repertorio dei canoni, staccato dalle sue sorgenti, vive ancora da sé, in una propulsione che sarà più lunga della nostra vita. Ed è ben questo il senso del dualismo accennato, che non è solo caratteristico della poesia di Saba, ma di tutti i poeti degli ultimi cinquant’anni almeno : dualismo ricomposto e sanato in mille successi parziali, ma non per questo meno pronto a ripresentarsi.<sup>101</sup>

Another aspect of Saba’s modernity, which equates him with Svevo, is constituted by his representation of a city -Trieste- which, although being presented in its reality, is configured as an ideal *civitas*, ‘che poco sopporta interpretazioni restrittive, fatte di “colore locale”, di generalità e di varia retorica’.<sup>102</sup> This

representation of Trieste introduces into Saba's poetry what Montale describes as 'il sapere di quell'acre georgica urbana che Baudelaire [...] portò incomparabilmente nella poesia francese',<sup>103</sup> which gives Saba's poetry a place in European modernity and which differentiates his modernity from that which consisted of '[l'] elogio dello *sky scraper* o della locomotiva o delle varie città -"morte o tentacolari"- che possa rintracciarsi in certe laudi dannunziane o nella poesia a spron battuto del primo futurismo marinettiano' or from 'certi già antichi innesti di "vita contemporanea" sul tronco della nostra lirica sedicente neoclassica...'<sup>104</sup> In Saba's poetry Trieste becomes a city of the spirit, which is not 'vernacola e lontana, ma dolorosamente vicina e conosciuta, s'anche materialmente ignorata, da ogni autentico, e sia pur modesto, franco-cacciatore del pensiero e dell'arte contemporanei.'<sup>105</sup> Such a city is polemically opposed by Montale to a certain contemporary literary provincialism and regionalism passed off as a literature reflecting the true Italian spirit.

Montale's concept of literary Europeanism as a key to the understanding and the definition of the interrelationship between tradition and modernity is expressed in his articles on foreign literature, in particular French literature. His reading of the work of Valéry Larbaud, for instance is centred on the "myth of the European man" which pervades Larbaud's work and which Montale interprets as Larbaud's awareness of his *humanitas* and its historicity, beyond form :

A Larbaud bisogna mandar buona questa mistica dell'intelligenza ; questa vigile coscienza di incarnare l'uomo rinuncia alle forme, s'anche le ami a una a una nella vita ; l'uomo che disfattosi di ogni canone per essere più spoglio e inafferrabile accetta la sua battaglia contro le facce del futuro [...] Sforzo di realizzare, in fondo, senza schemi la propria realtà più fondamentalmente umana : tanto nel tempo da essere ormai tutta fuori del tempo.<sup>106</sup>

Europeanism is therefore for Montale an existential as well as literary attitude : at the same time the acknowledgement and expression of one's own being in history and the awareness of a larger context by which one's own art is defined. The constant reference to a wider cultural perspective also functions as a counterpart to nationalistic appropriations of cultural definitions, as he points out in his 1927 article *Letteratura francese* :

E ci piace insistere sul carattere di illuminato europeismo che riveste l'attività letteraria del Brion [...] oggi che inopportune polemiche dimostrano offuscata la nozione di quel salutare equilibrio intellettuale che ogni scrittore, quando è scrittore davvero, tende a realizzare [...] tra la propria ispirazione e la forma che deve rinchiuderla e che non ha validità oggettiva se non è riferibile a termini ben più vasti di quelli che le sottoscuole letterarie pretenderebbero d'imporre. E termini universali non sono, occorre ricordarlo ?, né il cattivo *charabia* dei rimasticatori nostrani della peggior letteratura straniera, né il gergo da trivio (con tutto il modo che sottintende), nel quale si vuole da taluni ravvisare l'unica risorsa della nostra "tradizione"...<sup>107</sup>

Montale's concept of the *homo europaeus* as the highest expression of contemporary culture, against provincialism and nationalism, is further developed within the Europeanist tendency of the Florentine periodical *Solaria* to which Montale starts contributing in 1927, after moving to Florence to work for the Bemporad publishing house. In reviewing Carlo Linati's *Pubertà ed altre storie* Montale shows a particular appreciation of Linati's predilection for a certain heterogeneity of language -ranging from the 'meneghino' to the 'forastico'- which he considers preferable, as a representation of an aspect of *italianità*, to the 'Arcitalia d'amido e di gesso che vedo ancora in onore presso quattro malinconici provinciali.'<sup>108</sup> The definition of modernity as of a concept involving a wider cultural context than the national one is also found in his review of G. B. Angioletti's *Il*



*giorno del giudizio* : in Angioletti, Montale observes, the condition of modern man is perceived as pre-existing the reflection carried out through art and is defined as ‘un’eredità, un peso ch’egli porta fatalmente con sé per il solo fatto di esistere.’<sup>109</sup> Modernity is perceived as a “cross”, a weight to be carried by any contemporary European who is aware of his own condition. In this sense Angioletti is presented as :

buon europeo, senza *ismi* e danze del ventre novecentesche, attento viaggiatore nella propria stanza, umile e insieme orgoglioso sa portare senza ostentazioni, ma senza rinunzie la croce della sua modernità. E ch’egli non intenda soltanto ripetere con modulazioni proprie l’arida elegia urbana dei nostri giorni, i due scritti finali del recente libro lo dimostrano chiaramente : *La fuga del leone* e *Il giorno del giudizio*.<sup>110</sup>

Although he is not one of *Solaria*’s major contributors, Montale’s work -both his poetic and critical production- has an important role in shaping certain aspects of the periodical’s literary project (his “discovery” of Svevo, for instance). Giansiro Ferrata later will portray the poet almost as a “master” figure within the *Solaria* group:

Al centro di quelle risorse fiorentine stava Montale, con gli *Ossi di seppia*, già storici, *Le occasioni* in corso, l’intelligenza acuta e sinuosa e gli straordinari elementi umani, l’inesauribile varietà del personaggio ... eppure egli fu probabilmente il solo allora a insegnare qualcosa di utile, in concreto [...] Il solo, credo, a “insegnare” cose diverse, [...] chiarendovi intanto il fondamento primo del lavoro letterario che è il linguaggio proprio dell’uno o dell’altro scrittore, in armonia con lo sviluppo interno di un’epoca.<sup>111</sup>

### **Between tradition and Europeanism: *Solaria*'s early years**

Due son... gli argomenti che appassiano la critica militante dei nostri giorni :  
(Alberto Consiglio)

Nessun romanzo può diventare europeo, se non è ispirato da un sentimento morale...  
ma perché diventi europeo non un romanzo, ma tutta una letteratura...  
ci vuole, soprattutto, il senso della tradizione.  
(Leo Ferrero)

The periodical *Solaria* was founded by Alberto Carocci in January 1926 and published in Florence between 1926 and 1934. Giorgio Luti proposes a periodization for *Solaria* which identifies two specific periods : the first period, covering the years between 1926 and 1928, in which the periodical assumes a rigid attitude towards literature and is still linked to the models provided by *La Ronda* and *Il Baretto*<sup>112</sup> ; the second period, starting in 1929, is characterized by a new atmosphere within the group caused by the presence of new contributors, such as Giansiro Ferrata and Elio Vittorini and the disappearance of the rigidity of the previous positions, to be replaced by a closer reading of the texts and a more experimental attitude.<sup>113</sup> The analysis of the periodical in the years between 1926 and 1929 reveals the contemporary influence of *La Ronda* and *Il Baretto*. The experience of *La Ronda* is present as an uncompromising concept of literature ('non perdoneremo nemmeno ai fraterni ospiti le licenze che non sieno pienamente giustificate' is one of the programmatic statements in the article that opens the first issue), while the *solariani* inherit from *Il Baretto* the notion of the moral function of literature and the necessity of adopting a European style. According to Luti such a style is expressed by 'un'arte drammatica e umana', which represents the essence of European literature and its moral value.<sup>114</sup> Langella perceptively observes that *Solaria* represents a turning point

with regard to the legacy of *Il Baretto*: the latter had not given any space to literary production, apart from a few translations of foreign texts, ‘forniti quasi come documento’<sup>115</sup>. *Solaria*, instead, presents itself immediately as a literary periodical (its subtitle, *Rivista mensile di arte e di idee sull’arte*, is significant in this respect). The critic also points out that the synthesis of previous experiences operated by *Solaria* should not be evaluated only on the basis of the contributors already appeared on previous periodicals or of continuity of themes, but rather ‘sulle condizioni storiche oggettive del decennio della stabilità che, stringendo le maglie attorno al dissenso, praticamente imponevano una messa a confronto delle precedenti tendenze e la ricerca di una loro fusione.’<sup>116</sup> In this sense, the scholar notices that the geographical position of Florence has a key role in the relative cultural independence of the city in the inter-war years. Florence is in fact slightly “decentrata” compared to the “capital cities” of the regime, Rome and Milan, less subject to strict surveillance, and has an ideal position to be a point of cultural convergence, without ‘andare incontro a fastidi particolari’<sup>117</sup>. At the same time, it retains the prestige of its cultural tradition and it consolidates its role as ‘capitale dell’intelligenza’. All these elements allow Florence to develop ‘una cultura eretica, vale a dire non allineata neanche quando si dichiarava fascista; proprio perché non poggiava sulla forza attrattiva della politica, ma sull’ingovernabilità dell’intelletto.’<sup>118</sup> For these reasons Florence becomes a centre of confrontation and discussion, a

*koinè*, fucina non settaria ma mirante ad una superiore sintesi nazionale. Non resta senza significato [...] il caso dei milanesi Gadda e Ferrata, di Contini uomo di confine, dei liguri Bo e Montale, dei siciliani Vittorini e Quasimodo, dei laziali Tecchi e Ojetti, del veneto Noventa, e di numerosi altri che si trasferirono fisicamente, chi prima chi poi, in questo decennio, nella “simbolica Firenze”.<sup>119</sup>



In this context, the acknowledgement by *Solaria* of the value of contemporary European literature introduces in the critical debate of the time an idea of literary modernity -inferred from the works of such writers as Joyce, Proust and Svevo and which Montale's criticism particularly nourishes- as the expression of existential suffering and restlessness, to be opposed to the optimistic versions of modernity promoted by contemporary culture. A significant example of the *solariani's* disillusioned critique of the mystification represented by contemporary interpretations of the concept of modernity is a comment by Alberto Consiglio on Ardengo Soffici's *Periplo dell'arte*:

se il Soffici [...] avesse avuto il tempo e il modo di formarsi una così salda coscienza critica, non avrebbe con tanta minuzia arzigogolato intorno al significato di *moderno*. Si sarebbe avveduto che in senso classico la modernità, infatti non può esistere, perché in esso non è riconosciuto al tempo il valore attuale [...] Ma in senso romantico, sì, invece, modernità significa coscienza di esser vivo, coscienza che si raggiunge difficilmente spesso con dolore.<sup>120</sup>

The *solariani* therefore question the attempt by their contemporaries to reconcile modernity and *classicità* and propose a version of modernity as a form of often painful self-awareness, strongly rooted in history.

In its first issue, published in January 1926, *Solaria* presents itself as the "ideal city" of literature. The article that opens the first issue of the periodical states the periodical's stance within the context of the Italian literature of its time :

*Solaria* nasce senza un programma preciso e con qualche non spregevole eredità. [...]

Chi ha l'abitudine di sfogliare le riviste letterarie italiane ancora leggibili scorgerà tra noi più di un viso non ignoto, giustappunto perché vogliamo vivere in un'aria di libertà e di consuetudini già provate. [...] Non siamo idolatri di stilismi e purismi esagerati e se tra noi qualcuno sacrifica il bel

ritmo di una frase e magari la proprietà del linguaggio nel tentativo di dar fiato a un'arte singolarmente drammatica gli perdoniamo in anticipo con passione. Per noi, insomma, Dostoievski è un grande scrittore. Ma non perdoneremo nemmeno ai fraterni spiriti le licenze che non sieno pienamente giustificate e in questo ci sentiamo rondeschi.<sup>121</sup>

Although the *solariani* claim not to have a specific programme, some elements of their position emerge from this initial statement, in particular the need for “freedom” in literary practice, the insertion of the periodical within a literary and critical tradition, and the acceptance of the legacy of *La Ronda*, whose model is however partially questioned, in view to a more open approach to European literature (hence the slightly polemical reference to Dostoievsky).<sup>122</sup>

One of the tasks the *solariani* set for themselves is the redefinition of the role of the critic. What they question, in particular, is the close relationship between the critics and the public, which prevents the critics from a constructive interaction with the writers. They consider their work as critics as a *mestiere*, whose value lies precisely in its being a tool, part of the process of the production of the literary work. The metaphor used by Raffaello Franchi is exemplary of an almost ethical attitude towards the critical act : ‘La critica che noi tentiamo è un duro lavoro da gente del mestiere, che non ha paura di provare e riprovare, né d’insudiciarsi i vestiti e le mani.’<sup>123</sup> However, in the same article Franchi also invokes the critics’ detachment from the public and declares *Solaria*’s intention to be a *hortus conclusus* within the field of criticism, ‘un lucido, leggibile microcosmo, sotto una chiara campanina di vetro’<sup>124</sup>, thereby revealing how *Solaria*’s aspirations are confined to the exercise of literature.

It is within the limits of pure literature, therefore, that the formal legacy of *La Ronda* is interpreted by the *solariani* also in moral terms, as the *rondisti* are read as

writers who are constantly conscious of their status as writers ; it is made clear by the *solariani* at the very beginning of their project that awareness and a sense of responsibility are the essence of the moral stature of a writer, as is clear from Raffaello Franchi's comment on Cardarelli: 'Vincenzo Cardarelli [...] ci offre l'esempio di un'esperienza sorvegliata, implacabile, profondamente sofferta, e di una coscienza della responsabilità che servì sempre a stabilire la grandezza morale di uno scrittore e che oggi, letterariamente, può dirsi singolare.'<sup>125</sup> *La Ronda* is therefore part of the *solariani*'s redefinition of literary tradition, not only in terms of a methodological legacy, but also in terms the reappropriation of *La Ronda* as part of the canon, to such an extent that, for instance, the *solariani*'s attention to Leopardi is mediated through *La Ronda*'s reading of the poet.<sup>126</sup> An analysis of contemporary Italian literature cannot for the *solariani* exclude *La Ronda* and its legacy. This is particularly evident in Raffaello Franchi's article *Allarme*, published in the December 1926 issue, where he analyses the literary origin and cultural impact of the periodicals *Il Selvaggio* and *L'Italiano*, for which he shows appreciation and which, because of the general tone informing them, he identifies as direct descendants respectively of *Lacerba* and *La Ronda*. However, Franchi notices that a closer examination of the two periodicals reveals how

per un verso, il polemico tono lacerbiano del rondesco *Italiano* arrivi a compromettersi nel senso di fare un'intransigente guardia d'onore a ciò che *Lacerba* ci presentava per arte ; mentre per un altro verso, la vetrina selvaggia dei disegni e delle poesie, espone quell'arte e quella letteratura con sussiego e perentorietà rondeschi.<sup>127</sup>

Franchi points out that the fact that *Il Selvaggio*, in spite of *Lacerba*'s legacy, could be considered *rondesco*, whereas *L'Italiano* seems to be 'tendenzialmente



lacerbiano', is a sign of the lack of a clear direction in Italian literature, and, above all, of the lack of a literature that could really be said to be the expression of the new generation.

Once again the legacy of the recent past is problematized by the *solariani* : the relationship with such periodicals as *Lacerba* and *La Ronda* represents a significant example of the complexity of the relationship with the literary past established by certain intellectual groups at the end of the 1920s. By the time *Solaria* starts its activity, in fact, the problem is no longer only how to relate to and re-read tradition but how to relate to a tradition which is already mediated (in the case of *Solaria*, for instance, by *La Ronda*). On the other hand, the fact that such a periodical as *Lacerba* is used as another point of comparison, shows how the avant-garde experience has been acknowledged and absorbed and is by now considered as part of a tradition to relate to and challenge at the same time.

A process of problematization is also applied to the *rondisti*'s self-perception as critics, as they detach themselves from the critical tendencies of their time, in the name of that "ethical" attitude which they consider essential to their role. In this sense they reject any attitude of literary nationalism *per se* and defend the choice of their models on the basis of a true legacy to be inherited and in turn continued and transmitted to the future. For instance Franchi declares that the *solariani*'s fondness for such authors as Renato Serra and Scipio Slataper is not due to the attempt to 'risollevarlo in luce qualsiasi motivo di gloria italiana'. He claims that

in codesti morti noi cerchiamo quelle che sarebbero state le intrinseche rassomiglianze, nello svolgersi della loro opera, a faccia dei nostri problemi e del nostro attuale tormento. Studiandoli noi cerchiamo d'impadronirci di un'eredità che può ancora fruttare ed essere spinta lontano.<sup>128</sup>

A recovery of tradition is therefore seen by the *solariani* as the establishment of a continuity, be it with the writers and critics of the “canon” or of the recent past. (‘Noi vogliamo andare a prender per mano i morti troppo presto, e da loro [...] esser condotti lungo le vie di domani’,<sup>129</sup> they claim). In this sense they are aware that in their quest for continuity it is their task to create their own “canon”. The significance represented by the example of such a critic as Serra for the *rondisti* is also shown in an article by Aniceto Del Massa published in the November 1926 issue of *Solaria*, in which he describes Serra’s legacy as one of respect, acknowledgement and understanding of the Italian literary tradition. Only through the understanding of its essence is it, in fact possible, according to Del Massa, to conceive of an idea of tradition of “classical” inspiration, that is ‘non costretta, come la intendono e vogliono alcuni, nei termini fissi di pochi pregiudizi scolastici, ma aperta nello spazio, pronta ad accogliere ogni nuova manifestazione dello spirito, ogni soffio di pura e rinfrescante e giovanile armonia...’,<sup>130</sup>

Precisely because of this profound sense of continuity with a tradition whose links are “felt” rather than simply inherited, the *solariani* cannot accept that the dispute over “the old” and “the new”, which characterizes contemporary Italian debates, should be conducted on the grounds of *paesatismo* versus *europaismo*. They criticize *paesatismo* (with obvious reference to *Strapaese* and the *selvaggi* movement) since, although it claims to represent the Italian tradition, it does not continue the tradition it uses as a reference and in effect repudiates the civilization that such tradition represents :

gli antichi, e anche quelli da cui pretendono di discendere gli attuali paesani -esempio Michelangelo- eran degli aristocratici che possedevano la scienza dell'analisi per procedere, il più delle volte all'arte della sintesi. Quando non si dava il caso di chi vedeva per sintesi, come Leonardo, ed esprimeva per analisi.<sup>131</sup>

*Paesanism*, however, 'pare piuttosto propendere a un'arte negra di scarto che non a Raffaello'<sup>132</sup>: the *selvaggi* and the *Strapaese* movement can therefore only present a "rural" interpretation of tradition, which not only does not constitute the core of Italian artistic tradition, but also contradicts their version. On the other hand, the periodical *900*, which presents itself as a counterpart and an alternative to the *paesanism* phenomenon, proposes only a "simplistic" version of Europeanism and the whole dispute between *Strapaese* and *Stracittà* is judged by the *solariani* as not particularly important in the literary field, precisely because of the grounds on which it is conducted.<sup>133</sup>

The *solariani* believe therefore that the question of Europeanism is to be treated from a different perspective from that of the *novecentieri*. In the article entitled *Perché l'Italia abbia una letteratura europea*<sup>134</sup> Leo Ferrero presents a notion of literary Europeanism which can be considered as the expression of the *solariani*'s attitude towards the issue.<sup>135</sup> Ferrero's almost paradoxical claim at the beginning of the article that 'non siamo più europei perché non siamo più italiani' presents itself as a quasi programmatic statement meant to establish an immediate connection between Europeanism and Italian cultural identity. The definition of European literature that follows the initial statement introduces another fundamental element into the analysis of the relationship between European literature and national cultural identity, that is the issue of literary genres. Ferrero defines European literature as 'quella che dipinge il proprio paese, sottintendendo gli altri' and



specifies that the genre he considers in his argument is exclusively the novel. It is the novel, in fact, that expresses ‘quella chiave della vita, non solo europea, ma universale, che è il sentimento morale.’<sup>136</sup> Such interest in life, such moral passion, which nourishes the genre of the novel, has been lost in Italy, where the writers of the last generations are seen

chiusi nelle loro città illustri, splendenti e morte, nei loro caffè venerabili e lumacosi, attornati dai pochi amici di mestiere, coi quali, nonostante il lungo commercio, non hanno litigato, vivere, in mezzo agli uragani che hanno devastato l’Europa in questi tredici anni, una vita tranquilla, che una guerra turba meno di una recensione maligna !<sup>137</sup>

The loss of the character of Europeanism in Italian literature therefore coincides with the loss of the moral function of literary practice. As ‘interessarsi al mondo vuol dire, soprattutto patirne’, literature is the result of such suffering. The confinement to the aristocratic world of letters and the consequent lack of interest and participation in the world imply a neglect of the genre of the novel. When a novelist, Ferrero argues, refrains from “being a man” and withdraws to his ivory tower, he cannot but produce ‘preziose e inutili professioni di stile.’ A novel cannot be “European” unless inspired by a moral sentiment, as it is such a sentiment that brings together the men belonging to the same civilization.

Europeanism is therefore interpreted by *Solaria* as the acknowledgement of belonging to a specific civilization, an acknowledgement that can only take place through the recognition of a moral sentiment expressed through literature, in particular the novel. As a consequence, the *solariani* assume a critical attitude towards their predecessors, in particular the *rondisti*, who abandoned any involvement in the world -and consequently any interest in the novel- to turn to more

sterile literary and stylistic exercises. A return to the novel, therefore, should be interpreted as the retrieval of an ethical dimension to prose narrative.

However, the notion of European literature is also connected to the sense of tradition. Literary works can only expand beyond national boundaries through their perpetuation. Ferrero gives the case of *I promessi sposi* as exemplary in this respect, as, although it can be considered a “universal” novel and is translated into foreign languages, it is not read in Europe. This happens because *I promessi sposi* is an isolated literary case, whose legacy is not found in any contemporary literary work. As readers tend to concentrate on contemporary literature, a novel must represent the expression and continuation of a tradition. An example of such sense of continuity is represented by Russian literature : Ferrero uses the example of Gogol, whose *Anime morte* is still read by the European public as its tradition is perpetuated in the works of Tolstoy, Dostoievsky, Turgheniev, Chekov, Gorki. This form of tradition annihilates any clash between “the old” and “the new”, as the “old” writers are constantly “modern” and read. Ferrero’s conclusion to the article summarizes the terms in which the argument is posed and reinforces its programmatic character :

noi pensiamo d’aver posto il problema nei suoi termini umani : è inutile far della propaganda in Europa, se non si produce una letteratura europea. Bisogna che gli scrittori non si lascino accecare dall’orgoglio candido di inaugurare, ogni volta che scrivono un libro, un nuovo genere letterario ; che perpetuino invece, rinnovandole, delle grandi tradizioni ; ma soprattutto, che abbandonino il deserto, ridiventino uomini.<sup>138</sup>

To a certain extent, this article by Ferrero synthesizes the themes developed by *Solaria* in its early years : the necessity of retrieving the “human” side of literature, that is of retrieving its character of “commitment”, although unspecified; the promotion of the novel as a privileged genre to convey this human and moral aspect ;

the necessity of creating a truly European literature and, at the same time of perpetuating tradition ; a general necessity for both writers and critics of abandoning their ivory tower. Sandro Briosi identifies in the coexistence of tradition and Europeanism that characterizes Ferrero's article, the expression of the need, on the part of the intellectuals, to exorcise, 'entro le rassicuranti prospettive del progresso o della tradizione',<sup>139</sup> the crisis undergone by the bourgeois world. Such a reading might partially explain the unspecified character of the relationship between Europeanism and ethical commitment established by the *solariani*.

A similar position to that presented in the January 1928 article is expressed by Ferrero in the article *Lieviti letterari*, published in the July-August 1928 issue, where Ferrero introduces the notion of 'sottintesi' to explain the state of 'malessere' of contemporary Italian literature. According to Ferrero such a state is due to the writers' individualism and closure and to the lack of 'sottintesi', that is of 'fondamenti che tutti rispettano senza saperlo e quindi senza discutere'.<sup>140</sup> Ferrero maintains that 'nelle grandi epoche, questi sottintesi governano il ritmo di una civiltà matura [...] perciò [...] importa che siano vasti e prudenti, specialmente che tutti li riconoscano, perché così soltanto si stabilirà quell'ordine, che è la base di un'epoca.'<sup>141</sup> These 'sottintesi' provide unspoken boundaries, which are not expressed through rules, thereby avoiding the excesses represented by both Neoclassicism (uncritical obedience to rules) and Futurism (uncontrolled rebellion to rules). The presence of 'sottintesi' is therefore a sign of civilization : in order to achieve man's happiness 'una civiltà ha dunque come fine supremo di conciliare dei bisogni contraddittori : deve cioè soddisfare nell'uomo la sua nostalgia dei limiti e il suo orrore delle regole, e arrivare a una grandezza regolata da leggi che non si conoscono.'<sup>142</sup>



Within their concept of literature as civilization, the *solariani* are particularly interested in promoting the genre of the novel. The issue of the novel is related by the *solariani* to a wider cultural problem, involving in particular the relationship between Italian tradition and European literature. In his article *Diatriba sul romanzo ed altre cose*, published in June 1929, Alberto Consiglio identifies the interpretation of the concept of Europeanism and ‘la possibilità del romanzo’ as the two main issues concerning the “militant” criticism of his time. As has been seen, the two issues are for the *solariani* interrelated. The “European” genre of the novel seems not to be compatible with the Italian spirit : in Italy the novel is ‘non facile a produrre, non grato a leggere, o, almeno, non accettato con quella dignità e importanza che è propria dei popoli romantici.’<sup>143</sup> Once again, in the literary debate of the 1920s, a dichotomy is created between the north-European, romantic spirit deriving from the Reformation and the classicist spirit of Counter-Reformation Italy. Italian culture is presented as irreducibly “anti-romantic” ; ‘l’italiano, come popolo, come tradizione ancor viva, è composto di tutto ciò contro cui sorse il Romanticismo :

Diciamola pure la grossa frase : fra l’Italia e l’Europa romantica esiste una diversità sostanziale, irriducibile, inadeguabile. Quel temperamento di individualismo e di indipendenza che, come abbiamo descritto, forma la quintessenza del Romanticismo, è impossibile, è inconcepibile ancora nel paese della Controriforma e del Settecento.<sup>144</sup>

As the Italian can only conceive of himself as part of a hierarchically structured universe (as distinct from the Protestant “romantic”, seen as the demiurge of an individual universe), his Roman, Catholic civilization presupposes an art subordinate to nature : ‘poemi, prose, mitologia che contengano degli essenziali riferimenti alla natura e alla verità. Esempio : i prosatori del Rinascimento e, ancora meglio, la

religione rigorosamente antropomorfa dei romani.’<sup>145</sup> The fact that some major pre-romantics and some important romantics are Italian -Consiglio mentions Petrarch, Ariosto, Venetian painting, the Baroque, the *Arcadia*, Parini, Manzoni, Foscolo, Leopardi- only confirms the fact that there are only Italian romantics, but not an “Italian Romanticism”. These isolated individuals stand out like giants in the literary landscape of their time. Nonetheless, it cannot be said that Italian literature is bound to have nothing but a naturalistic literature, disrupted from time to time by the work of an isolated genius. Consiglio suggests that the time is ripe to have in Italy ‘un’eccellente letteratura veramente romantica e, insieme, un’eccellente letteratura di tipo [...] classico’. As the two tendencies, “romantic” and “Roman”, coexist in Italy, it is important for writers to identify the real nature of their inspiration, so as not to see ‘uno spirito romantico che s’impania, obbedendo alla tradizione e all’ambiente, in pastoie retoriche, o, viceversa, uno spirito classico e terrestre tentar goffi voli che si risolvono in rigide astrazioni’<sup>146</sup>, as it so often happens in contemporary Italian literature. The task of the critics consists in providing guidance to young writers, to give them the tools that enable them to identify their artistic nature. In order to fulfil his task the critic should be aware of his role and not indulge in propaganda : *italianità* and Europeanism should not, therefore, be the object of arrogant disputes and be opposed as if one excluded the other.

Lia Fava Guzzetta notices that the need felt by the *solariani* to promote a rediscovery of the novel coincides with the necessity ‘di mettere in questione il concetto di letteratura come puro divertimento ed evasione, e di individuare invece un nuovo ruolo ed una ulteriore funzione che essa possa avere, il che comporta un tentativo di aggancio del fatto letterario alla vita.’<sup>147</sup> It is in this sense that one should interpret Franchi’s comments on Guido Da Verona :

L'umana sofferenza d'artista, [...] la sofferenza che Da Verona versa e fonde nell'opera sua, ci serva a riconoscerli un primo diritto di vera cittadinanza tra la nostra gente. E per un po' di tempo non sia più questione di lingua, di stile, di grammatica, di purezza, di classicismo e di neoclassicismo, ma di vita, di miserabile calor vitale.<sup>148</sup>

There is no doubt that Franchi's mention to Da Verona is polemical. As Da Verona's work represents in the 1920s the epitome of the corruption and vulgarization of style and themes of D'Annunzio's epigones<sup>149</sup>, it is used here as an extreme example of anti-classical, anti-puristic style. It is possible, although it is not clear from Franchi's comment, that Da Verona's choice to use the genre of the novel and his awareness of the needs of the public might have a part in the critic's favourable attitude to an altogether mediocre and commercial writer. After all, it must not be forgotten that Da Verona had already received some favourable reviews in the early Twenties from Giuseppe Antonio Borgese. Among the aspects he had found positive in the novelist's work Borgese had mentioned precisely the fact that 'egli compone, scrive romanzi, porta a termine ciò che ha cominciato, insomma fa qualche cosa. E' questo non è di moda...'<sup>150</sup>

The interest in the novel also represents a movement beyond *frammentismo* and the beginning of a new literature, which will inherit and develop the experience of *La Voce* and *La Ronda*. In this sense the legacy of these important periodicals can be incorporated in the new prose as a period of "preparation", thereby creating the continuity with the recent tradition, which is an essential element of *Solaria*'s critical position. As Piero Gadda points out in a review of Bacchelli's *Lo sa il tonno*

il pericolo che affronta la giovane letteratura, così lungamente abituata a impraticarsi nella tecnica del frammento [...] è di serbare [...] l'abitudine al "pezzo di bravura" col risultato [...] di ottenere degli squarci descrittivi



o lirici distaccati dall'opera a cui dovrebbero appartenere [...] Nel *Tonno* tale pericolo è stato sempre superato, e anche a questo riguardo il libro può essere considerato uno delle testimonianze più rappresentative che la nostra prosa, dopo gli anni di preparazione vociana e rondesca, sta compiendo per adeguarsi alle necessità del racconto spiegato.<sup>151</sup>

*Solaria's* treatment of the issue of the novel partially emerges in the issue devoted to Italo Svevo.<sup>152</sup> What appears from the various contributions is a perception of Svevo's work as belonging to a category which can be considered distinct from most contemporary Italian literature. As the reference models for his novels are constantly identified as being the great European novelists of the nineteenth and early twentieth century, he begins to be defined both as a writer of international stature -to be opposed to the particularism and nationalism of contemporary literary movements- and as a representative of a notion of European modernity, which is presented as an alternative to the various versions of modernity produced by intellectual groups in the post-war years.

In Consiglio's contribution, for instance, Svevo is presented as a writer who has gone beyond the particularism of a literature confined to national boundaries and has acquired a European dimension, while retaining his fundamental Italian essence. Svevo's Europeanism makes him a truly new "romantic", according to the European romantic tradition, since, according to Consiglio, Romanticism in Italy followed a *sui generis* development, in tune with the Italian fundamentally classical *forma mentis*. The product of such a mentality 'è tipicamente letterario, istintivamente adeguato all'ars poetica, rigorosamente distaccato da ogni intimo travaglio, precisamente oggettivato in una forma egregia studiosamente estraniata dal vivo parlare.'<sup>153</sup> Consiglio claims that such an almost "physiologically" classical frame of mind affected even Italian nineteenth-century Romanticism and that Svevo can be

considered a true romantic precisely because he upsets the traditional features of Italian prose narrative. Svevo's "romanticism" is not negatively connotated by the *solariani*. In fact, to a certain extent, it contributes to defy a certain idea of classicism conceived exclusively as linguistic "purism". As Raffaello Franchi puts it:

si può dire che mentre il purismo mantiene la regola perché non si perda la onestà e, alla civiltà di un paese, necessaria plebe letteraria, son poi gli scrittori della razza di Svevo che decisamente mettono in progresso la storia letteraria di una nazione. Per essi un movimento come quello della *Ronda* indietreggia nel giusto piano (filologicamente e sostanzialmente giusto) della buona opera poliziesca.<sup>154</sup>

It is precisely because of its modernity that Svevo's work moves beyond the category of classicism and belongs to that of *classicità*.

What Vittorini appreciates in Svevo is his 'volontà di scrittura assoluta', which defies stylistic rules. Such an intention, Vittorini claims, 'non era per Svevo, una rinuncia a scrivere in maniera *artiste*, ma ripeteva la grande vocazione stendhaliana della scrittura corsiva, dello stile da codice civile...'<sup>155</sup> Svevo represents a literature that pursues the quest for 'una verità che bisognava portare a galla dall'imo del proprio essere [...] Si trattava di fomentare nelle parole un alto significato umano...'<sup>156</sup> For these reasons Svevo, even in his first novel -which is the subject of Vittorini's article- was already a precursor, in terms of being, at a time when the most influential writers were Fogazzaro and D'Annunzio, a truly "new", European novelist, the only one that could be compared to Stendhal, Balzac or Gogol.

As far as poetry is concerned, Montale and Saba represent for the *solariani* the expression of the 'spirito inquieto' produced by contemporary European culture.

Such spiritual restlessness is interpreted as the expression of a fundamental existential “pain” which the poetry of Montale and Saba exemplify. In his article *Eugenio Montale* Alberto Consiglio, comparing the two poets, identifies two different attitudes towards what he calls the ‘dissidio tra l’uomo e il mondo’. Consiglio identifies in Saba a ‘poeta primigenio’, whose poetry carries the legacy of Romanticism ‘per via fisiologica’ and expresses existential pain without any rational mediation : ‘lo spirito di Saba canta come vive, senza elaborazioni intermedie’<sup>157</sup>. Montale, on the contrary, is fully aware of the pain and contradictions of existence : his poetry is therefore lyrical verse and thought at the same time. Saba and Montale therefore represent two manifestations of the spirit of modernity, which, in both cases, is presented as “suffering”. Consiglio argues that in the formation of the modern spirit it is important to consider that

un uomo fornito di una vasta eppur minuta sensibilità è, molte volte, costretto, nel breve ciclo di anni che va dalla sua prima adolescenza alla sua prima maturità, a rivivere sommariamente tutta la serie di vicende spirituali che ha impiegato, nell’organismo più vasto della razza, numerosi secoli per giungere sino all’atteggiamento attuale.<sup>158</sup>

Consiglio implies that a modern sensibility, when applied to culture, will to a certain extent experience all the pain, joy, suffering and disillusion of a whole cycle of spiritual history. The modern epoch is here interpreted as ‘crepuscolo’ and the modern poet as the ideal personification of an innumerable succession of generations. Having lost what Consiglio calls a ‘rete ideologica’ and confronted with the constant act of negation that constitutes his only spiritual heritage, the modern writer can only apply his sensibility to minutiae, the objects, the details of everyday life. Such is the case of Proust, Svevo, Rilke, Montale and Joyce : ‘su ogni minuta cosa,’ -Consiglio



comments- in ogni particolare è tutta la novità di questo mondo, tutto il meraviglioso, tutto il degno di essere scoperto.’<sup>159</sup> However, whereas in the novelists the chaos of the contemporary world is objectively and realistically registered, the poets seem to pursue an overall sense, some form of harmony. A desire for harmony can be perceived in Montale’s work : he searches for the meaning of life in life itself, in its sensory appearance. In this sense Montale is conclusively defined by Consiglio as ‘la quintessenza dello spirito romantico esaurito in uno sforzo secolare e, ad un tempo, la coscienza viva e certa di un mondo fisiologico, di una legge vitale che che sopravvive sdegnosa a tutte le parabole dello spirito.’<sup>160</sup> Such a poet as Montale represents therefore a modernity which shatters any notion of harmony in the classical sense and rejects any self-indulgent refuge in consolatory notions of *classicità*: harmony is a constant quest, not necessarily achieved or achievable.

Evidence of *Solaria*’s position, oscillating between an established literary tradition and the acknowledgement of the pressing issues presented by modern artistic forms, is shown in the *solariani*’s attitude towards cinema. An enquiry on cinema, entitled *Letterati al cinema*, to which *Solaria* devotes the March 1927 issue<sup>161</sup> reveals the problems involved in confronting the critical problems related to the increasing importance in the artistic scene of a new medium, particularly a medium enjoyed by “the masses”. The issues addressed by the contributors to the debate are mainly the relationship between traditional, more elitist, artistic forms and popular art, and whether the latter -which includes cinema- can be considered a form of art or whether it is to be seen merely as pure entertainment; the relationship between cinema and the arts on which it draws, such as literature and theatre, whether cinema can be an independent artistic form or only subsidiary to other arts,

and what is the effect on cinema of other arts; and finally the possibility of an aesthetics of cinema.

The contributions to the enquiry show a mixed attitude among the *solariani* towards the new medium. The brief introduction to immediately clarifies that such an exercise does not have the aim of providing a contribution to an aesthetics of cinema, but simply a series of opinions. The title given to the enquiry itself -*Letterati al cinema*- suggests that the subject matter will be dealt with from a literary point of view (providing 'un mazzo di fresche impressioni letterarie' is the only aim of the group). What emerges from the debate is a general view on cinema as mainly an inferior form of art, assessed according to the critical criteria used for literature or theatre. A clear example of this position is represented by Angioletti and Bacchelli's contributions. According to Angioletti, 'il cinematografo è un'arte eminentemente popolare : la nuova arte popolare. Grave errore sarebbe [...] renderla arte raffinata, ermetica o sibillina.'<sup>162</sup> Bacchelli considers cinema as a minor form of art and he compares it with pantomime, dance and fashion. He argues that cinema will develop and improve its own specific technology, thereby distancing itself from literature and theatre. Baldini goes as far as to declare that there can only be a remote possibility of developing an Italian cinema, as 'bisogna [...] per il cinematografo essere divinamente e crudelmente ragazzi come sono gli americani.'<sup>163</sup> Franchi maintains that it is necessary to love cinema, being aware of its detachment from art, as cinema is only 'un'ombra, un fantasma d'arte.'<sup>164</sup> Bastianelli defines cinema as 'la rivincita estetica' of the petty bourgeoisie. His assessment of cinema as a form of art involves a polemical attitude against both the cultural expressions of the contemporary bourgeoisie and popular culture and, to a certain extent, summarises the position of the contributors according to whom cinema is a minor art :



La piccola borghesia cittadina, così poco favorita dai risorgenti destini medioevali (in senso di abuso di privilegi concessi ai nuovi plutocrati, oppure in senso di abusi alla rovescia, abusi stranamente plebei; per esempio il diritto ai *circenses* moderni: podismo, *box*, *football*, corse ciclistiche di resistenza, etc.), la piccola borghesia, dico, ha ben bisogno d'una rivincita estetica –che compensi i vecchi “amatori dell'arte” (e i loro figli non degeneri)- della fine del teatro a grandi colpi di scena, della morte di Giacomo Puccini, e del pullulare di certi romanzieri taglienti e ironici –come Bontempelli, Palazzeschi, etc.- che, a lettura finita o a velario chiuso, se si tratta di drammaturghi- lasciano i sullodati piccoli borghesi (terribilmente cittadini) con lo spavento d'aver constatato – di non capire più nulla; peggio: perfino di non saper più leggere.<sup>165</sup>

Debenedetti seems to be the only contributor who believes in the possibility of cinema representing a self-sufficient and independent form of art on the same level as literature or theatre : cinema -he claims- ‘è [...] un'arte ; alla quale si potrà applicare l'estetica crociana’<sup>166</sup>. As far as the question of the relationship between cinema and literature is concerned, such a question, according to Debenedetti, should not be posed, as cinema and literature are related to and can influence each other only as two independent artistic forms can.

Bragaglia's and Betti's contributions question the impact of cinema on the theatre : they both agree that cinema and theatre, although being two independent art forms, are to a certain extent related, especially as far as the impact on the public is concerned. In this sense both authors maintain that it is important that each art does not compete with the other, especially on the technological level, and that each finds its specific character and function within the artistic realm. In particular they both claim that theatre must retain its identity, which is constituted by its own specific features, such as the physical presence of the actor and the power of the word. The presence of cinema, therefore, requires theatre to redefine itself, to go back to its



essential components, even though this might imply the loss of its popular appeal. As

Betti puts it :

il teatro, se non vorrà essere un duplicato sgangherato costoso e morituro, dovrà tornare ai regni che sono suoi, anche se ciò gli costi l'abbandono dei grossi pubblici : guadagnare in profondità, intensità, quanto perde in estensione, riessere mistero, canto religione, avendo a suoi strumenti quelli che nessuna macchina gli ha rubato : la magnetica presenza dell'interprete e la parola.<sup>167</sup>

Montale's perceptive contribution to the enquiry identifies the problem connected to the relationship between cinema and theatre, beyond any polemical attitude or vested interest. On the one hand -Montale points out- theatre is accused of having betrayed its origins as a popular form of art, of having become obscure and turned into an elitist form of art ; cinema in this case is praised as 'arte di tutti, arte di folla, arte pienamente tempestiva e' attuale'<sup>168</sup>. However, for most people cinema is an inferior form of theatre, whose artistic character is only revealed in some works and not in the cinematic genre, and it is only perceived as such by a privileged few. If that is the case, Montale argues, if cinema can be considered a form of art -however difficult- then theatre should not be accused of having betrayed its popular origins and having become art. It seems that any assessment on cinema is based on its popularity and even the critical favour it enjoys is more the result of practical considerations than of the birth of a new 'sensibilità cinematografica'. Any critical assessment of the artistic value of cinema and, within it, of what is to be considered art and what is simply fashion is premature, as cinema is too new compared to the other forms of art.

*Solaria*'s early years represent a moment of transition: the legacy of *La Ronda* and *Il Baretti* is accepted and continued, but also reinterpreted. The return to tradition and the stylistic intransigence of *La Ronda* is used -although critically- as a model for approaching the question of style, while the *solariani* inherit from *Il Baretti* the notion of Europeanism. However, *Solaria*'s notion of Europe is more ambiguous than that of *Il Baretti*. In this respect, scholars and critics have argued that the idea of Europe that emerges from the pages of *Solaria* is fundamentally literary and almost mythical, an abstract cliché constructed around a series of texts and distant from reality<sup>169</sup>, which has lost the emancipatory connotation (both from the political and ethical point of view) that it had had for the intellectuals of *Il Baretti*. *Solaria*'s Europe is therefore, to use Giuseppe Langella's words, 'più vagheggiata che raggiunta.'<sup>170</sup>

- <sup>1</sup> The *barettiani* who contributed to *Solaria* were Raffello Franchi, Guglielmo Alberti, Leo Ferrero, Eugenio Montale, Giacomo Debenedetti, Sergio Solmi.
- <sup>2</sup> Cfr. Giuseppe Langella, *Il Secolo delle riviste. Lo statuto letterario dal "Baretti" a "Primato"* (Milano : Vita e Pensiero, 1982), pp. 62-63.
- <sup>3</sup> *La Rivoluzione Liberale*, 25 November 1924, cited in Giuliano Manacorda, *Dalla Ronda al Baretti. Intellettuali di fronte al fascismo negli anni '20* (Foggia : Bastogi, 1981), p. 168.
- <sup>4</sup> Santino Caramella, 'Il nuovo cortegiano', *La Rivoluzione Liberale*, 23 September 1924, in *Le riviste di Piero Gobetti*, ed. by Lelio Basso (Milano : Feltrinelli, 1961), p. 599.
- <sup>5</sup> *Il Baretti* was published in Turin between 1924 and 1928. Piero Gobetti was its editor between 1924 and 1926. In 1926 Piero Zanetti became the general editor. The periodical published articles on literature (both Italian and foreign), art, culture and philosophy. Besides Piero Gobetti, its main contributors were Santino Caramella, Giacomo Debenedetti, Raffaello Franchi, Leone Ginzburg, Mario Lamberti, Umberto Morra Di Lavriano, Natalino Sapegno, Eugenio Montale.
- <sup>6</sup> *Il secolo delle riviste*, pp. 48-49.
- <sup>7</sup> Piero Gobetti, *Energie Nove*, 15-31 December 1918, cited in *Dalla Ronda al Baretti*, p. 63.
- <sup>8</sup> *Il secolo delle riviste*, p. 49.
- <sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 43.
- <sup>10</sup> Piero Gobetti, 'Illuminismo', *Il Baretti*, 23 December 1924, p. 1.
- <sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*
- <sup>12</sup> *Il Baretti* deals with such European authors as Gide, Larbaud, Joyce, Tolstoi, Dostoievsky, Proust, Mac Orlan, Ibsen, Unamuno, Woolf, Rilke, Goethe, Schiller, Baudelaire, Verlaine, Valery, Strachey, Wackenroder, George and others.
- <sup>13</sup> Piero Gobetti, 'Per una società degli apoti II', *La Rivoluzione Liberale*, 25 October 1922, in *Opere complete*, ed. by Paolo Spriano (Torino : Einaudi, 1960), pp. 412-413.
- <sup>14</sup> Natalino Sapegno, 'Resoconto di una sconfitta', *Il Baretti*, 23 December 1924, p. 1.
- <sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*
- <sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*
- <sup>17</sup> Umberto Morra Di Lavriano, 'La scuola della "Voce"', *Il Baretti*, 23 December 1924, p. 2.
- <sup>18</sup> *Il Baretti*, 5 March 1925, p. 20.
- <sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*
- <sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*
- <sup>21</sup> Guglielmo Alberti, 'Lettera d'occasione', *Il Baretti*, 1 February 1925, in *Le riviste...*, p. 619.
- <sup>22</sup> Luca Pignato, 'Il nostro Carducci', *Il Baretti*, 20 March 1925, p. 21.
- <sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*
- <sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*
- <sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*
- <sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*
- <sup>27</sup> *Il Baretti*, 16 February 1926, p. 11.
- <sup>28</sup> 'Critica ed autobiografia'.
- <sup>29</sup> *Il secolo delle riviste*, p. 70.
- <sup>30</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 72-73.
- <sup>31</sup> Langella mentions in particular the 1925 *Manifesto of the anti-fascist intellectuals* and the *Storia d'Italia dal 1871 al 1915*, published in 1928.
- <sup>32</sup> 'Tra una fioritura spettacolosa ed esuberante di letterature straniere ; con una lunga e completa tradizione letteraria alle spalle da sceverare e ricostruire nei suoi veri lineamenti, da demolire in parte e in parte ancora da scoprire ; avendo innanzi un terreno su cui pochi e rari sono oggi i segni di una produzione consistente : possiamo far molto perché molto abbiamo da fare.' ( 'Propositi del "Baretti"', *Il Baretti*, 12 December 1926, p. 115)
- <sup>33</sup> 'Propositi del Baretti', p. 115.
- <sup>34</sup> *Il secolo delle riviste*, p. 70.
- <sup>35</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 71.
- <sup>36</sup> Cfr. Eugenio Montale, ' "Dubliners" di James Joyce' (1926), now in *Il secondo mestiere. Prose 1920-1979*, ed. by Giorgio Zampa (Milano : Mondadori, 1996), pp. 143-150. Mentions of Joyce's work are also found in Montale's essays on Svevo.
- <sup>37</sup> Uno dei Verri (Santino Caramella), 'La giostra dei pugni', *Il Baretti*, 12 December 1926, p. 120.
- <sup>38</sup> Paolo Flores, 'Richiesta di una critica', *Il Baretti*, 12 December 1926, p. 116.
- <sup>39</sup> *Ibid.*



- <sup>40</sup> 'Il carattere dell'opera svolta dal Croce nel campo dell'estetica sta nell'aver liberato il concetto dell'arte dai pregiudizi che ancora vietavano il riconoscimento della sua peculiare autoctisi.' ('Richiesta di una critica', p. 115)
- <sup>41</sup> *Il Secolo delle riviste*, p. 76.
- <sup>42</sup> Uno dei Verri, 'Frusta e Fiera', *Il Baretto*, 12 December 1926, in *Le riviste...*, p. 635.
- <sup>43</sup> '...ciò che si vende in fiera dev'essere, o per quantità o per qualità, superiore a ciò che tutti i giorni si può comperare nelle botteghe : se non fosse così la fiera non avrebbe ragione di esistere. Perché allora la *Fiera Letteraria*, che dovrebbe raccogliere settimana per settimana le grandi firme e i grossi calibri della nostra letteratura, si compiace tanto di riempire le sue colonne con la quintessenza della produzione provinciale ? forse perché in Italia non c'è altro che provincia ?' ('Frusta e Fiera', p. 635).
- <sup>44</sup> Uno dei Verri, 'La giostra dei pugni', *Il Baretto*, November 1926, p. 114.
- <sup>45</sup> Arrigo Cajumi, 'Primi spunti novecenteschi', *Il Baretto*, November 1927, p. 52.
- <sup>46</sup> Uno dei Verri, 'La giostra dei pugni', *Il Baretto*, Nov.-Dec. 1927, p. 62.
- <sup>47</sup> *Ibid.*
- <sup>48</sup> Il Baretto, 'Ottimismo e autoincensamento', *Il Baretto*, 16 February 1928, p. 6.
- <sup>49</sup> Arrigo Cajumi, 'Sagome di contemporanei', *Il Baretto*, July 1927, p. 33.
- <sup>50</sup> In English in the text.
- <sup>51</sup> 'Sagome di contemporanei', p. 33.
- <sup>52</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 34.
- <sup>53</sup> *Ibid.*
- <sup>54</sup> *Il Baretto*, 16 February 1928.
- <sup>55</sup> *Il Baretto*, 16 February 1928, in *Le riviste...*, p. 650.
- <sup>56</sup> *Ibid.*
- <sup>57</sup> In this respect Cristina Benussi notices that Cajumi's analysis represents a shift in critical perspective : 'è proprio in questo articolo ['La crisi del romanzo'] [...] che si avverte il trapasso [...] verso una nuova prospettiva critica [...] dove a imporsi è proprio la coscienza dell'impossibilità di guardare ormai come a una realtà ferma e serena l'eternità dei valori della storia e dell'uomo. Al classicismo crociano, al razionalismo illuminista e all'impegno morale gobettiano, si affianca ora l'accettazione della crisi non più camuffabile delle strutture conoscitive borghesi.' Cristina Benussi, 'Un dibattito sul romanzo negli anni Venti : *Il Baretto*', in *Letteratura e società. Scritti di italianistica e di critica letteraria per il XXV anniversario dell'insegnamento universitario di Giuseppe Petronio*, ed. by Giuseppe Petronio (Palermo : Palumbo, 1980), p. 603.
- <sup>58</sup> *Il Baretto*, April 1927, p. 25.
- <sup>59</sup> Cfr. Giuseppe Sciortino, 'Tendenze letterarie', *Il Baretto*, 5 March 1925, p. 20.
- <sup>60</sup> 'La sensibilità di D'Annunzio', *Il Baretto*, April 1927, p. 25.
- <sup>61</sup> Santino Caramella, 'Tradimento degli scrittori', *Il Baretto*, 16 February 1928, in *Le riviste...*, p. 655.
- <sup>62</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 657-658.
- <sup>63</sup> 'Un dibattito sul romanzo negli anni Venti', p. 604.
- <sup>64</sup> Both during the Twenties and in successive years a considerable part of Montale's critical work is composed of reviews. In the 1920s he contributes to such periodicals as *Primo Tempo*, *Il Baretto*, *Il Convegno*, *L'Esame*, *La Fiera Letteraria*, *Solaria*. Cfr. Giorgio Zampa's introduction to E. Montale, *Il secondo mestiere. Prose 1920-1979* (Milano : Mondadori, 1996), pp. XXX-XXII.
- <sup>65</sup> Cfr. Eugenio Montale and Italo Svevo, *Lettere* (Bari : De Donato, 1966), p. 21.
- <sup>66</sup> Guido Mazzoni, 'Il posto di Montale nella poesia moderna', in *Montale e il canone poetico del Novecento*, ed. by Maria Antonietta Grignani and Romano Luperini (Roma-Bari : Laterza, 1998), p. 399.
- <sup>67</sup> Montale contributes to *Il Baretto* three articles, all published in 1925: the programmatic article *Stile e tradizione* (year II, n.16) and two articles on European literature, entitled *Valery Larbaud* (year II, n.6-7) and *Un servo padrone* (on Ivan Cankar, year II, n.16).
- <sup>68</sup> Umberto Carpi, 'Montale critico', in *Letteratura italiana. I critici*, ed. by Gianni Grana, (Milano : Marzorati, 1969), V, p. 3429.
- <sup>69</sup> 'Chiose. Emilio Cecchi', in *Il secondo mestiere*, p. 16.
- <sup>70</sup> 'Il pensiero di Alain di Sergio Solmi', in *Il secondo mestiere*, p. 429.
- <sup>71</sup> 'Stile e tradizione', *Il Baretto*, 15 January 1925, p. 7.
- <sup>72</sup> *Ibid.*
- <sup>73</sup> *Ibid.*
- <sup>74</sup> *Ibid.*
- <sup>75</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>76</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>77</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>78</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>79</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>80</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>81</sup> Giuseppe Nava, 'Montale critico di narrativa', in *Montale e il canone poetico...*, p. 249.

<sup>82</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>83</sup> 'Omaggio a Italo Svevo', *L'Esame*, November-December 1925, in *Lettere*, p. 101.

<sup>84</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 105.

<sup>85</sup> First published in the periodical *Il Quindicinale* on 30 January 1926.

<sup>86</sup> 'Presentazione di Italo Svevo', *Il Quindicinale*, 30 January 1926, in *Lettere*, p. 108.

<sup>87</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>88</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>89</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 111. Montale considers all Svevo's three novels exceptionally "modern", as he clearly states in a 1926 letter to Svevo, where he writes: '[...] penso ch'Ella non abbia atteso il 1923 per essere in possesso della propria originalità; e che Le gioverà anche *storicamente*, di non lasciare porre in disparte i libri del '93 e del '98. Scrivere *Zeno* nel '920 è prova di sommo ingegno; scrivere *Senilità* nell'Italia del '98 (!!!) è forse prova di genio.' (In *Lettere*, p. 16).

<sup>90</sup> With reference to *La Coscienza*'s characters, Montale observes that these characters are the exact expression of the modern epoch, as they are not 'visioni cosmopolitiche, anime d'eccezione od altrettali risorse; ma queste borghesi figure di Svevo sono ben cariche di storia inconfessata, eredi di mali e di grandezze millenarie, scarti ed *outcasts* di una civiltà che si esaurisce in se stessa e s'ingorga. Più che l'eterna miseria inerente all'universalità degli uomini, l'"imbecillità" dei personaggi di Svevo è dunque un carattere proprio dei protagonisti di cotesta nostra epoca turbinosa.' ('Presentazione...', p. 111)

<sup>91</sup> 'Presentazione...', p. 111.

<sup>92</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 112.

<sup>93</sup> 'Giornate di lettura: Charles Du Bos', in *Il secondo mestiere*, p. 225.

<sup>94</sup> 'Io sono, come Ella sa, ormai da un pezzo *definitivamente* convertito a *Zeno*, che nei primi approcci m'era sembrato una selva meravigliosa ma un po' incolta e intricata.', (In *Lettere*, p. 88)

<sup>95</sup> Cfr. 'Ultimo addio', in *Lettere*, cit., pp. 119-124. How complex Montale's relationship is with Svevo's novels is also shown in a letter written by Montale to the periodical *L'Italia Letteraria* in 1929, where he writes: 'Il Saviotti mi rimprovera di aver preferito a *Zeno* il secondo romanzo del triestino, *Senilità*. Tutti i miei articoli [...] dimostrano il contrario.' (in *Lettere*, p. 130)

<sup>96</sup> 'Umberto Saba' in Eugenio Montale, *Il secondo mestiere*, p. 117. (The citation is from an article by Debenedetti appeared in the periodical *Primo Tempo* in October 1923)

<sup>97</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>98</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 118.

<sup>99</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 119.

<sup>100</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 120.

<sup>101</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 122.

<sup>102</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 128.

<sup>103</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 122.

<sup>104</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>105</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 128.

<sup>106</sup> 'Valery Larbaud', in *Il secondo mestiere*, p. 34.

<sup>107</sup> 'Letteratura francese', in *Il secondo mestiere*, pp. 240-241.

<sup>108</sup> 'Pubertà ed altre storie di Carlo Linati', in *Il secondo mestiere*, p. 201.

<sup>109</sup> 'Il giorno del giudizio (*Miti e Fantasie*) di G. B. Angioletti, in *Il secondo mestiere*, p. 260.

<sup>110</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 261.

<sup>111</sup> Giansiro Ferrata, *Ricordi di un longobardo in Toscana* (nn 4-5-6 of *La Chimera*, Firenze: Vallecchi, 1954), cited in Giorgio Luti, *La letteratura del ventennio fascista* (Firenze: La Nuova Italia, 1972), p. 123n.

<sup>112</sup> *Solaria* was published in Florence between 1926 and 1934. It hosted fiction, articles on literature and art, and book reviews. Among its main contributors were Alberto Carocci, Guglielmo Alberti, Alessandro Bonsanti, Alberto Consiglio, Giansiro Ferrata, Leo Ferrero, Raffaello Franchi, Carlo Emilio Gadda, Piero Gadda, Arturo Loria, Eugenio Montale, Renato Poggioli, Salvatore Quasimodo, Giuseppe Raimondi, Umberto Saba, Elio Vittorini.



<sup>113</sup> Cfr. *La letteratura...*, pp. 122-123.

<sup>114</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 80.

<sup>115</sup> *Il secolo delle riviste*, p. 77.

<sup>116</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 97.

<sup>117</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 89.

<sup>118</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>119</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 90.

<sup>120</sup> Alberto Consiglio, 'Ardengo Soffici, Periplo dell'arte. Richiamo all'ordine', *Solaria*, February 1929, p. 116.

<sup>121</sup> *Solaria*, January 1926, pp. 3-4. The article is the opening statement of the periodical and has neither title nor author.

<sup>122</sup> Sandro Briosi defines *Solaria*'s attitude at the beginning of its publication as 'una pacata disponibilità a sperimentare il nuovo, su un fondo di sicurezza in se stessa che le viene dalla profondità con cui affonda le radici nella tradizione, in una difesa strenua dell'autonomia della propria attività, in una rigorosa risoluzione della "politica" nella "morale"'. (*Il Problema della letteratura in "Solaria"*, Milano : Mursia, 1976, p. 8)

<sup>123</sup> Raffaello Franchi, 'Paragrafi dello scontento', *Solaria*, January 1927, p. 32.

<sup>124</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 31.

<sup>125</sup> Raffaello Franchi, 'Vincenzo Cardarelli', *Solaria*, February 1926, p. 39.

<sup>126</sup> Cfr. Raffaello Franchi, 'Allarme', *Solaria*, December 1926, p. 42 : 'se, come scrittori sensibili all'esistenza di problemi letterari che non possono né restare individuali, né risolversi nella forma ormai conclusa di alcuni felici scrittori, noi ci rimettiamo [...] dal punto di vista rondesco, quello d'essere cioè Leopardi il primo grande maestro di poesia che abbia avuto l'Italia, dopo Dante [...] noi dobbiamo abbandonare Palazzeschi e ripigliare scolasticamente il filo della tradizione poetica leopardiana.'

<sup>127</sup> 'Allarme', *Solaria*, December 1926, pp. 41-42.

<sup>128</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 43.

<sup>129</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 44.

<sup>130</sup> Aniceto Del Massa, 'Renato Serra', *La Ronda*, November 1926, p. 47.

<sup>131</sup> Raffaello Franchi, 'Facile apologia del difficile', *Solaria*, October 1927, pp. 49-50.

<sup>132</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 49.

<sup>133</sup> In this regard Franchi comments : 'che novecentismo e paesanismo siano, in fondo, due tenutine grandi quanto un balocco da ragazzi è un fatto incontrovertibile. Basta pensar che un tipo simpatico come Malaparte, costantemente a caccia di termini semplici, di chiari paradossi e di colori elementari per dare sfondo e successo al suo indiscutibile talento, è riuscito a collocare un piede su ciascuna di esse...' ('Facile apologia...', p. 51).

<sup>134</sup> *Solaria*, January 1928.

<sup>135</sup> Ferrero is particularly concerned about the risk that *Solaria* might become close and provincial and is interested in accentuating *Solaria*'s European character, not only from the point of view of its content, but also from that of its presentation. This is evident from two letters from Ferrero to Carocci, where he invites the editors to use European periodicals as an example for *Solaria*. The first is dated 14 March 1929 :

'ora che leggo, in Francia, dieci o dodici riviste vedo che *tutte* sono più varie [di *Solaria*], si occupano di più cose. Dovreste leggere con attenzione tutte le riviste anche voi e studiare come sono fatte'. The second is dated 30 October 1929, after Giansiro Ferrata was offered to become co-editor of the periodical : 'Io vi sarei infinitamente grato se voleste, tu e Ferrata e gli altri comprarvi tutte le riviste francesi e tedesche, metterle sul tavolo e studiare in che maniera son fatte, per dare vita e varietà a *Solaria*.' Both letters are in *Lettere a Solaria*, ed. by Giuliano Manacorda (Roma : Editori Riuniti, 1979), respectively p. 113 and p. 173.

<sup>136</sup> 'Perché l'Italia abbia una letteratura europea', *Solaria*, January 1928, p. 33.

<sup>137</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 32-33.

<sup>138</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 40.

<sup>139</sup> Cfr. *Il Problema della letteratura...*, p. 30. Giorgio Luti too sees *Solaria*'s literary project as a moment of awareness for bourgeois culture : 'L'ecclettica cultura di *Solaria* consegna infatti il profilo di una borghesia ormai cosciente della propria resa di fronte al fascismo, e che anzi ormai al fascismo tutto concede sul piano sociale e politico nella speranza di salvare letterariamente una presunta integrità morale. Di contro al momento rondiano in cui la borghesia "attende" nella certezza di inserire nel proprio ingenuo gioco il movimento fascista ormai in cammino, il momento borghese di *Solaria*



rappresenta l'attimo della "coscienza", la consapevolezza di una collusione sicura...' (*La letteratura...*, p. 102).

<sup>140</sup> 'Lievitati letterari', *Solaria*, July-August 1928, p. 34.

<sup>141</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>142</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 36.

<sup>143</sup> Alberto Consiglio, 'Diatriba sul romanzo e altre cose', *Solaria*, June 1929, p. 45.

<sup>144</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>145</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>146</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 49.

<sup>147</sup> Lia Fava Guzzetta, 'Gli anni di *Solaria* : dal frammento al romanzo', in *Dai solariani agli ermetici*, ed. by Francesco Mattesini (Milano : Vita e Pensiero, 1989), p. 176.

<sup>148</sup> Raffaello Franchi, 'Paragrafi dello scontento', *Solaria*, January 1927, p. 33.

<sup>149</sup> Following but vulgarizing D'Annunzio's style and choice of themes, by the mid 1920s Guido Da Verona had written a series of erotic and melodramatic novels, which aimed at a large public. These novels had been very successful, because of their escapist character, which appealed to the taste of the post-war bourgeoisie. Among Da Verona's most famous works are *La donna che inventò l'amore* (1915); *Mimi Bluette, fiore del mio giardino* (1916); *Il libro del mio sogno errante* (1919); *Sciogli la treccia Maria Maddalena* (1920); *Lettere d'amore alle sartine d'Italia* (1924); *L'inferno degli uomini vivi* (1926); *Mata Hari. La danza davanti alla ghigliottina* (1927).

<sup>150</sup> Giuseppe Antonio Borgese, *Tempo di edificare* (Milano: Treves, 1923), p. 73.

<sup>151</sup> Piero Gadda, 'Appunti su "Lo sa il tonno" di Riccardo Bacchelli', *Solaria*, February 1927, p. 47. With regards to this problem, it is worth mentioning an article by Bonaventura Tecchi, published in the February 1929 issue, where he presents the problem faced by young writers as : 'svolgere da un recente punto d'arrivo che per i giovani è come l'ultima tappa della tradizione, in cui diverse esperienze si condensano e che può essere indicato col binomio diversissimo di Voce-Ronda, il filo dell'arte nuova, soprattutto pensando ad un'arte narrativa [...] la quale [...] senza rinnegare, anzi tenendo in onore, gli acquisti formali e tecnici delle utime generazioni, non si sentisse né da questi né da quelli impacciata ad avviarsi verso il nuovo...' ('Mario Gromo. "Scrittori contemporanei"', cited in Lia Fava Guzzetta, 'Gli anni di *Solaria*...', p. 178).

<sup>152</sup> March-April 1929. Besides articles by the *solariani*, the issue published contributions from numerous Italian and European writers and critics, such as Ivan Goll, James Joyce, Valery Larbaud, Aldo Palazzeschi, Giuseppe Raimondi, Sergio Solmi, Umberto Saba, Gianni Stuparich, Bonaventura Tecchi. Many of the contributions were based on personal memories and anecdotes.

<sup>153</sup> Alberto Consiglio, 'Caratteri di Svevo', *Solaria*, March-April, 1929, p. 23.

<sup>154</sup> Raffaello Franchi, 'Omaggio a Svevo', *Solaria*, March-April 1929, p. 41.

<sup>155</sup> Elio Vittorini, 'Italo Svevo. Una vita', *Solaria*, March-April 1929, in *Antologia di Solaria*, ed. by Enzo Siciliano (Milano : Lerici, 1958), p. 160.

<sup>156</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>157</sup> 'Eugenio Montale', *Solaria*, November 1928, in *Antologia di Solaria*, p. 47.

<sup>158</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 49.

<sup>159</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 57.

<sup>160</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 61.

<sup>161</sup> The debate hosted contributions by, among others, Guglielmo Alberti, Giovan Battista Angioletti, Riccardo Bacchelli, Antonio Baldini, Giacomo Debenedetti, Raffaello Franchi, Eugenio Montale, Anton Giulio Bragaglia, Ugo Betti.

<sup>162</sup> Giovan Battista Angioletti, 'Cinematografo', *Solaria*, March 1927, pp. 6-7.

<sup>163</sup> Antonio Baldini, 'Amo le cinematografie americane', *Solaria*, March 1927, p. 10.

<sup>164</sup> Raffaello Franchi, 'Cinema e, per esempio, pittura', *Solaria*, March, 1927, p. 31.

<sup>165</sup> Giannozzo Bastianelli, 'Contro le illusioni cinematografiche', *Solaria*, March 1927, p. 12.

<sup>166</sup> Giacomo Debenedetti, 'Cinematografo', *Solaria*, March, 1927, p. 21.

<sup>167</sup> Ugo Betti, 'I nostri tempi', *Solaria*, March 1927, pp. 16-17.

<sup>168</sup> Eugenio Montale 'Espresso sul cinema', *Solaria*, March 1927, p. 58.

<sup>169</sup> Cfr. Giorgio Luti, *La letteratura...*, p. 87 and Giuseppe Langella *Il secolo delle riviste*, pp. 100-101.

<sup>170</sup> *Il secolo delle riviste*, p. 101.

## Chapter 5

### ARDENGO SOFFICI AND CLASSICISM : FROM FUTURIST AESTHETICS TO INTRANSIGENT *SELVAGGISMO*

Essere alla moda vuol dire essere moderni.  
E chi non è alla moda e moderno è fuori dell'arte viva  
(*Primi principi di una estetica futurista*, 1920)

*Il faut être absolument moderne*, diceva Gustave Courbet :  
e diceva una sciocchezza o una banalità  
(*Periplo dell'arte*, 1928)

Giorgio Luti defines Soffici's experience as 'una parabola culturale ed artistica che è sicuramente da considerarsi tra le più significative del Novecento Italiano.'<sup>1</sup> The interest and significance represented by Ardengo Soffici can be effectively summarized by his own statement : 'io rappresento il sincero travaglio dello spirito Italiano nel trapasso da secolo a secolo presso a poco come per Mussolini, nato Carducciano [...] divenuto sovversivo e finito naturalmente capo del fascismo e della *nuova* Italia, nell'ordine, nella classicità.'<sup>2</sup>

As a painter, a writer and a critic Soffici is a key figure in the debates on art and literature from the beginning of the century.<sup>3</sup> He is representative of the process of transition from a position of support for the avant-garde to the post-war return to order, leading to the retrieval of rediscovered and redefined notions of *Italianità* and *classicità* and the consequent support for fascism. Soffici's critical work also represents a significant example of a process of gradual politicization of the aesthetic discourse, to such an extent as to make, by the end of the Twenties, aesthetic and



political theorization virtually inextricable. In this regard, Walter Adamson effectively summarizes Soffici's attitude towards fascism as exemplary of that of many intellectuals in the period : 'Could one be a member of the fascist movement and also an independent artist ? Could a "fascist art" create the conditions for a "return to order" and yet remain tied to the modernist movement in culture ?'<sup>4</sup> These issues are central in Soffici's theoretical essays and influence his definitions of such concepts as tradition, modernity, order, *classicità*, *italianità*.

Soffici's *Primi principi di una estetica futurista*, written between 1914 and 1917<sup>5</sup> and published as a complete work in 1920<sup>6</sup>, represents the artist's transition from futurist aesthetics to the post-war return to order. It partially retains elements of the theorization carried out by the Florentine futurist group between 1913 and 1915. In particular, the necessity of formulating an aesthetic theory within which the futurist movement could be inscribed, belongs to the quest for theoretical legitimation expressed by the Florentine avant-garde. The scission between *Futurismo* and *Marinettismo*, in fact, had taken place over the relationship with the past and literary tradition. The Florentine group had distanced itself from Milanese Futurism and had appropriated the paternity of the futurist movement, as it claimed that 'il Marinettismo ha mostrato di tendere a una creazione e propagazione di forme nuove, senonché, mancando assolutamente di quelle vere basi teoriche, incapace di approfondimenti, le sue realizzazioni si sono rivelate anzitutto esteriori, non solo, ma soltanto in apparenza originali e attuali.'<sup>7</sup>

As the *Lacerba* intellectuals described Futurism as 'un movimento di pensiero', they claimed that 'le sue basi teoriche vanno stabilite in un approfondimento dei più azzardosi problemi filosofici, estetici, psicologici, morali.'<sup>8</sup> What they had accused



Marinetti and the Milanese futurists of was their blind rejection of the past, due to their lack of awareness that past culture can only be superseded once studied in depth and absorbed. They had based their artistic identity on a series of categories, such as ‘disprezzo del culto del passato’ (as opposed to what they define as Marinetti’s ‘disprezzo del passato’), ‘originalità, ironia, aristocrazia, patriottismo, latinità’<sup>9</sup> and had identified as their precursors such writers as Voltaire, Baudelaire, Leopardi, Mallarmé, Rimbaud and Nietzsche. However, Luciano De Maria maintains that ‘la distinzione lacerbiana tra Futurismo e Marinettismo risulta oggi [...] inconsistente ed appare dettata più che dalla sostanza delle cose da umori polemici e da alcuni fraintendimenti. Si tratta tutt’al più di una diversa pronuncia, ma l’idioma è lo stesso.’<sup>10</sup> He interestingly notices that in Soffici’s *Primi principi*, which in his view concludes the phase of the so-called ‘futurismo eroico’, ‘non è dato accertare una sola tra le idee portanti che non sia rinvenibile in Marinetti’<sup>11</sup>:

Quel che è nuovo è l’esposizione più pacata, aforismatica a volte, non tumultuosa e intimidatoria come nei manifesti marinettiani, con l’accento insistito su alcuni elementi dadaisti (clownismo, funambolismo), ed alcuni accenni conciliativi (l’arte come “godimento sereno”, “contemplazione spirituale”, perfetto equilibrio dei sensi e dell’intelligenza”, “armonia superumana”, “tranquillità estasiata”), che tolgono asprezza all’estremismo futurista e preludono al *rappel à l’ordre* che in quel torno di tempo doveva seguire non solo in Italia ma nell’intera Europa.<sup>12</sup>

However, in the preface to the 1920s edition of the work, Soffici specifies that he does no longer belong to Futurism: ‘se anche il titolo di questo libretto porta la parola *futurista*’, he claims, ‘non si deve [...] vedervi altro che un tentativo mio personale di ridurre a teoria diversi postulati estetici che quella scuola, cui un momento appartenni, aveva posti solo oscuramente alla base delle sue esperienze poetiche ed artistiche’.<sup>13</sup> This element almost of contradiction together with the

complex chronology of its composition and publication give *Primi principi* the appearance of a work of transition, encompassing elements of avant-garde theorization with Soffici's personal quest for the forms of a "true Italian art."<sup>14</sup>

One of the first elements presented by Soffici's theorization is the need to re-establish a relationship between form and the represented object. In the section entitled *Rapporto fra arte e natura* he claims that it is necessary to return to a direct relationship between nature –as reality in its manifest form- and the work of art. This could be seen to form the basis of Soffici's theory of synthetic realism, which he will develop in the 1920s and which constitutes the attempt to reconcile the avant-garde anti-mimetic stance with the notion of a realism "other" than the one represented by mere mimetic art.<sup>15</sup> In this respect he claims that

quando si dice che l'artista moderno deve emanciparsi dalla natura, s'intende dalla natura quale è vista e sentita dal comune degli uomini. [...] L'artista nuovo considera la natura come un campo d'esperienza, come uno stimolo per la sua sensibilità, come un materiale di cui può variare all'infinito le combinazioni e le armonizzazioni...<sup>16</sup>

Another important feature of a new futurist aesthetics is the rejection of the relationship between art and emotions. In the section of the *Primi Principi* entitled *L'arte e il sentimento* Soffici develops the definition of a new idea of art based on 'lucidità, [...], freddezza [...], calma divina', as 'l'arte vera non ha nulla a che fare con [...] affetti e sentimenti. Non solo, ma la loro manifestazione è la prima prova dell'inferiorità del prodotto artistico.'<sup>17</sup> Part of the new aesthetics is the rejection of a series of established genres and, precisely because of the emotional involvement they require, their confinement to the category of divertissement:



Il teatro, il romanzo, la satira, per la letteratura; l'opera e le composizioni da salotto e da piazza, per la musica; i quadri storici, di genere, il ritratto, la caricatura, per la pittura, i monumenti commemorativi, i busti di famiglia, le allegorie patriottiche, funebri, ecc., per la scultura non hanno alcun rapporto con l'arte [...]; e ciò in primo luogo perché il fine di coteste opere è di commuovere, di esaltare, di svegliare l'amore, l'odio, la tristezza e il ridicolo. Un'estetica nuova deve rigettare tali forme spurie e ibride nella categoria degli sports e degli spassi...<sup>18</sup>

Although applied to futurist aesthetics, such a concept of art already contains the classicist stance that will characterize Soffici's aesthetics in the 1920s. The serenity and detachment of the artist is compared to that of the philosopher or the scientist when they discover a new truth or a new law of nature. Art is therefore defined as 'felice meraviglia; *étonnement hereux*', as it expresses the achievement of a perfect balance between senses and intellect. It is in this context that Soffici rereads Marino's famous line 'è del poeta il fin la meraviglia': the task of the artist is to consciously express the 'sorpresa prolungata davanti a una realtà che si rivela sempre nuova e imprevedibile'<sup>19</sup>. In this sense Marino, as a creator of new forms, is defined as 'un pioniere della modernità'<sup>20</sup>, as opposed to the creators of bizarre, strange and fanciful forms, such as Ariosto, Holbein, Dürer or Poe. As a matter of fact, Soffici claims, futurist aesthetics is fundamentally realist and rejects any grotesque and imaginary form in favour of '[lo] svisceramento, [l'] esaltazione e illuminazione del concreto sensibile, più portentoso e appassionante di ogni finzione idealistica.'<sup>21</sup>

If Marino's modernity is identified as the pursuit of new forms, to be achieved through the attentive examination of the aesthetic possibilities intrinsic to sensuous reality, in the section *L'arte e la moda* modernity is defined as 'moda', according to the Baudelarian definition of modernity as 'the transient, the fleeting, the contingent ; it is one half of art, the other being the eternal and the immovable.'<sup>22</sup> Soffici considers the element of "fashion" of fundamental importance in art, to such an



extent as to declare that art *is* fashion : ‘l’arte è moda nella stessa guisa che l’anima e il corpo sono inscindibili.’<sup>23</sup> If modernity is interpreted as ‘moda’, the logical consequence is that ‘essere alla moda vuol dire essere moderni’, and, Soffici provocatively adds, ‘chi non è alla moda e moderno è fuori dall’arte viva.’<sup>24</sup> The necessity for the presence of an element of ‘moda’ in modern art shifts the emphasis from a notion of modernity conceived of in terms of originality to a concept of “modern” as the expression of the essence of the epoch, hypostasized by fashion. As a consequence, among the various concepts that Soffici’s aesthetics questions, there is also the notion of originality : the romantic and bourgeois concept of originality as the achievement of artistic genius is rejected in favour of a concept of originality as a conquest. By stating that ‘[l]’originalità non è tanto una qualità naturale, quanto una laboriosa e dura conquista’ and that ‘[o]gni forma di originalità è legittima, purché resulti da un’attività estetica disciplinata, e ne secondi [...] i principî e i caratteri fondamentali’<sup>25</sup>, Soffici both introduces the notion of art as “craft” rather than inspiration and defines originality not in absolute terms but as strictly related to the development of artistic tradition. Originality, as a form of modernity, can therefore only be achieved through ‘l’assimilazione, l’assorbimento, indi la necessaria negazione di tutti i valori estetici precedenti.’<sup>26</sup> Artistic tradition is not rejected, but reinterpreted as revolution and development and, therefore, appropriated. Soffici claims that ‘Per sincerità estetica [...] non si deve intendere [...] la facilità dell’ingegno pigro che varia appena le forme illudendosi di continuare la tradizione, e non s’accorge di negarla, perché tradizione vuol dire sviluppo, rivoluzione, e non piétinement sur place.’<sup>27</sup> Modernity, therefore, cannot be separated from a tradition oxymoronically defined in revolutionary terms and the notion of originality is therefore deprived of any element of arbitrariness and transformed into a form of

order.

Soffici's aesthetics of modernity also questions, in an idiosyncratic way, the concept of both the autonomy and the heteronomy of art, thus representing a moment of synthesis between the aestheticist notion of the autonomy of art and the avant-garde quest for reconciliation between art and life-praxis, as described by Bürger. Although, as he claims, 'tutti i più grandi non sono veramente grandi che quando sono liberi', the autonomy of art is not to be interpreted as "art for art's sake", which is a formula already belonging to the past:

l'arte per l'arte, idealità di ieri, si è scissa e precisata in altre formule decisive, pregnanti, indici di una più risoluta e feconda liberazione. [...] Ho parlato fin qui di una libertà elementare, fondamentale e come necessariamente preparatoria per un ampio sviluppo dell'arte in quanto pura manifestazione della sensibilità. Un'estetica futurista deve contemplare altre forme di libertà di ben altro genere, ben più temerarie, sfrenate; amplissime e quasi illimitate.<sup>28</sup>

Soffici, therefore, rereads the notion of the autonomy of art and gives it a sense that goes beyond "art for art's sake": if, on the one hand, the concept of art is desacralized and its function apparently reduced to pure 'divertimento'<sup>29</sup>, on the other, the idea that precisely because of its function art tends toward its self-annihilation leads to a concept of art as an all-pervasive system. If the aim of art is in fact to sharpen and refine man's sensitivity to such a point as to make itself useless, then art, Soffici argues,

in quanto prodotto individuale, non ha più ragione di essere, unicamente perché l'espressione, che è la sua base, è passata, dalle opere particolari, negli atti comuni della vita, la sensazione si è tradotta in sentimento e in azione: il Lirismo, in una parola, è divenuto la legge e la regola armonica dell'esistenza di tutti.<sup>30</sup>



In the 1920s Soffici devotes himself to the development of the aesthetic principles initially outlined in *Lacerba* and more systematically treated in his *Primi principi*. However, new elements assume a progressively important role in his redefinition of the modern, namely the notions of *Italianità* and *classicità*<sup>31</sup>, which will constitute key concepts in his aesthetic theorization throughout the 1920s. In the introductory article to his periodical *Rete Mediterranea*<sup>32</sup> he states:

Ho scelto il titolo *Rete Mediterranea*, per significare la mia intenzione di creare un centro di collegamento fra i punti sensibili della civiltà, appunto, mediterranea, che credo superiore a tutte. Come sono un fervente dell'italianità, così il mio amore e la mia fede si estendono come una rete a tutto quanto di solare è nel pensiero e nell'arte delle nazioni affini, intorno al glorioso bacino. [...] E in quanto al programma, esso può riassumersi in questo. Difesa e illustrazione della stessa cultura mediterranea, con l'affermazione insieme, di un'energia personale nella sua fase di pieno sviluppo.<sup>33</sup>

Although Soffici's programme responds to the post-war call for order, in the September 1920 issue of *Rete Mediterranea*, he publishes an apology of Futurism, where he points out the essential role of Futurism in the renewal of Italian art:

Funzione prima di tutto pratica; la quale potrebbe definirsi : liberazione dall'incubo dell'originalità, della modernità straniera, guardata con invidia e suggestione [...], stimata un'indice di superiorità ; di grandezza da doversi assolutamente eguagliare [...] Funzione morale ; in quanto riaffermazione di vitalità, comunque destinata a modificare il giudizio degli altri su noi, già considerati generalmente quali torpidi rimestatori e rabberciatori di grandezze passate, o abili truccatori di genialità d'accatto, o manipolatori vuoti e veniali di false modernità ; sempre quali degeneri eredi un gran patrimonio, impotenti ad accrescerlo, miserabilmente portati a falsificarne i valori. [...] Funzione estetica, per ciò che concerneva l'urgenza di rinnovare, non solo lo spirito e le forme della



nostra creazione, ma anche gli strumenti, la materia e ogni cosa....<sup>34</sup>

Futurism is dead ('il futurismo è morto') Soffici proclaims, but it has had a destructive and "moralising" function which has been positive within Italian art. The task of the artists who have survived the futurist (and the war's) "great conflagration" is one of reconstruction : paradoxically, it is precisely the revolutionary character of the futurist movement that has generated the quest for order and the 'intellectual, artistic and moral discipline'<sup>35</sup> which characterize the post-war "new" modernity. Order can in fact only be defined against an acknowledged notion of "lack of order", which, in the aesthetic field, is attributed to Futurism. However, Futurism has also had the positive function of renewing Italian art and of creating and establishing the notion of an "Italian" modernity.<sup>36</sup>

The task Soffici sets for himself and contemporary artists after the death of Futurism is therefore to promote an idea of modernity based on "reconstruction", that is on the acknowledgement of a constant interaction between tradition and innovation, past and present -which constitutes, to use Giorgio Luti's words, 'la linea maestra della modernità'<sup>37</sup>- in order to reach a synthesis leading to a modern *classicità*. The redefinition of modernity in a new, "post-futurist" sense implies a reconsideration of aesthetic categories and values, in accordance with the new tendency towards a classical and traditionalist order deriving from a concept of aesthetics which has been developed throughout the centuries and only "resurrected" after having being buried under what Soffici calls 'Un cumulo di errori passeggeri, ormai riconosciuti per tali da tutti i creatori della nuova generazione'.<sup>38</sup>

One of the most important elements in Soffici's development of an aesthetic

of *classicità* is the notion of the indissolubility of the ethical and the aesthetic element in art. He identifies the harmony between form and content as the fundamental ethics of art and defines this moral quality as ‘una virtù di natura etica inerente e indissolubile da quella puramente estetica’<sup>39</sup> with which art manifests itself ‘per necessità’. The transposition of aesthetic into moral values is applied by Soffici to all the fields of art and to the work of artists such as Dante, Leopardi, Machiavelli, Manzoni, Giotto, Masaccio, Donatello, Raffaello, Tintoretto and, above all, Michelangelo, who is invoked as containing ‘attributi di ciò che chiamiamo il Bene’, which is identified as ‘salute morale, equilibrio, amorevolezza, onestà, giusta forza, saggezza umana, saldo volere’<sup>40</sup>, all qualities expressed by his mere use of form. A return to traditional classicism should therefore take into account the fundamental fact that ‘nei tempi che furono veramente *classici*, classicismo voleva anche (anzi soprattutto) dire ammissione di alcune gerarchie d’ordine spirituale, morale e sociale.’<sup>41</sup> *Classicità*, therefore, is not only an aesthetic but also a spiritual category and it is charged with an ethical value. In the context of Soffici’s theorization an equation begins to emerge between *bello* and *bene*, which also includes the element of *vero*, as only “true” art can achieve morally valid and aesthetically pleasing results. He, in fact, claims that ‘l’arte è sempre morale, quando i suoi risultati sono vivi e belli, quando ciò è vera arte; e d’immorale non v’è che l’opera falsa, brutta e morta, ossia il prodotto di una facoltà che in nessun modo può esser detta artistica.’<sup>42</sup>

The distancing from classicism is therefore conceived of as a rejection of these spiritual and moral categories rather than an estrangement from what is perceived as classical form. As Simonetta Bartolini stresses, ‘la soluzione proposta da Soffici al “problema di stile” è di ordine metodologico e non formalistico’<sup>43</sup>: he does not propose a specific style, but rather a general methodological approach to issues of

form. His development of the notion of classical as possessing an ethical character is based on the strict interrelation between art and its function within society. The great epochs described as classical, Soffici argues, were epochs in which there was a close relationship between, for instance, the cult of the hero, the mode of representing him, and the political and social principles that ruled that particular society. In those epochs, the artist's grandiose style was obtained through an autocratic mastery over form, the same mastery that the despot exercised over his people. However, as social relationships changed, the artist's aesthetic focus changed too. Works of art of a regal, religious, heroic character were replaced by works which drew their inspiration from everyday life and people. That was the beginning of modern art, which, Soffici claims, can only be called "modern" because of this transposition of values. Modern art, he continues, has the function of

rivelare l'essenza divina dell'universo liberato dalle teologie e dalle teocrazie, dalle tirannie celesti e terrene con tutte le loro esclusioni, le loro mortificazioni, le limitazioni arbitrarie, gli schematismi formali, le rigidità aristocratiche e gl'impoverimenti [...] che caratterizzano [...] lo stile delle opere artistiche in cui s'incarna il loro spirito superbo e terribile.<sup>44</sup>

As reality can be represented only through 'lo stato d'animo dell'uomo stesso che [...] contempla'<sup>45</sup>, modern art can only be "lyrical", with the modern artist concentrating his attention on 'la vita ordinaria del suo tempo'. From this point of view modern art can therefore only be "realist", as it represents everyday reality. Nonetheless, contemporary art, Soffici stresses, aspires to a condition of *classicità*, this being interpreted as 'idealità, [...] spiritualità e [...] universalità dell'espressione', achieved through a 'senso dell'armonia cosmica'<sup>46</sup>. The new classicism will be 'tutt'altra cosa da quello che comunemente s'intende anche quando non si tratta di



una pura astrazione intellettualistica. Quel classicismo è morto insieme al mondo ideale nel quale era nato, e di cui era la manifestazione poetica ed artistica.’<sup>47</sup>

The emphasis placed on the notion of a “new” classicism polemically distances Soffici’s concept of a return to order from certain contemporary artistic and literary tendencies. The obvious polemical target seems to be *La Ronda*, since for *La Ronda* the notion of a return to order in art coincides with a detachment from politics, a tendency identified by Soffici with *accademismo*, the most dangerous among the risks which a return to order might imply. By *accademismo* and *accademia* he means ‘lo sforzo vano di ripristinare e rimettere in onore alcuni “valori” oblitterati, o aboliti del tutto nella vicenda letteraria’<sup>48</sup>. Such an attempt is considered an idle and useless exercise, as it never produces ideas and techniques which are in tune with the artistic sensibility of the present. It nonetheless is, Soffici argues, the fundamental mistake made by all *accademie*. In Italy, in particular, the “return to order” after the war has displayed the same characteristics as the return to the *accademia* which characterized the beginning of the century (with such periodicals as *Convito*, *Hermes* and *Rinascimento*, for instance). The reference to *La Ronda* and its project is evident, although Soffici never mentions the periodical or its contributors.<sup>49</sup> His polemical attitude towards *ritorni* as exercises in academicism seems to suggest that Soffici’s response to the post-war general “call for order” is based on the “construction” of a new idea of order rather than on a return to some past models. Soffici’s relationship with the past even in his post-avant-garde more conservative theorization is a dialectical one of absorption and rejection : tradition is for him an interlocutor rather than a master. It is precisely this constant dialogue with tradition which leads Soffici to identify the return to order with the continuation of an artistic line which constitutes the truly Italian artistic character and which corresponds to a modern

version of *classicità* - as distinct from ancient *classicità*. What distinguishes the modern *classicità* from the ancient one is the presence of the spirit of Christianity, which pervades it. Within the notion of *classicità* Soffici creates a distinction between antiquity and modernity. In an article entitled *Roma-Napoli-Pompei* he distinguishes between the Greek and the western, catholic, ultimately Italian version of the classical:

Tra quella pittura e questa v'è la stessa differenza che fra la poesia del pagano Omero e quella del cattolico Dante. Omero è certo più melodioso, più solare, Dante è più umano, più atrocemente religioso, e dunque più nostro. Ammiriamo Omero, ma stiamo dunque con Dante. Così ammiriamo la pittura pompeiana e greca, invidiamo coloro che potevano farla con quella felice tranquillità d'animo che essa rivela; ma ci atteniamo con passione alla nostra moderna, aderente come quella alla realtà, ma alla realtà *nostra*, di occidentali, di cattolici, di Italiani.<sup>50</sup>

As ancient *classicità* cannot be opposed to barbaric modernity ('Così, se di barbarie si deve parlare, barbara dovrebbe essere tutta la modernità, barbari noi stessi'<sup>51</sup>), Soffici proposes a version of *classicità* which should have a specifically Italian character, as distinct from the commonly perceived notion of *classicità* as a product of ancient civilizations. The antinomy he creates is not between the concept of *classicità* -as tradition- and that of modernity, but between classicism -as the essence of the Italian spirit- and Romanticism -as the expression of Northern Europe.

In *Spirito ed Estetica del Fascismo*<sup>52</sup> Soffici clarifies his position on the relationship between fascism and art. In this article he maintains that 'Il Fascismo, non essendo un fatto meramente politico, ma riflettendo un complesso stato d'animo e di coscienza, interessa tutto l'uomo spirituale.'<sup>53</sup> Being a spiritual as well as a political movement it must promote, together with economic and social policies, 'un'azione



intellettuale e dello spirito' which should be expressed in literature and art. Soffici then adds :

questa è almeno la persuasione di quanti, uomini non politici nel senso stretto del termine, solleciti però dell'elevazione Italiana, non indifferenti ai rapporti fatali che esistono tra fatti politico-sociali e fatti intellettuali ed estetici, hanno aderito al movimento fascista. E fin dal primo momento in cui il Fascismo si è messo alla direzione della nostra vita, questi uomini hanno aspettato da esso più che altro i segni e i saggi di una rinnovazione completa dell'anima e dell'intelligenza nazionale.<sup>54</sup>

Such statement reveals the essence of Soffici's support of fascism<sup>55</sup>, which can be identified in the fundamental quest for intellectual as well as cultural regeneration. Starting from this basis, Soffici uses his aesthetic principles to construct his own version of a possible fascist art. He argues that at the root of pre-war Italian artistic decadence is the distinction and inevitable clash between artistic theories of romantic and of classical derivation. The classical tendency is described as the more congenial to the Italian spirit and it is the tendency that should be promoted in the creation of a project which Soffici calls 'di vero assestamento intellettuale, morale ed estetico'<sup>56</sup> and which will constitute the core of the Italian spiritual renewal. This project should be based on a return not so much to tradition, but rather to 'traditional values', and the term tradition is to be interpreted as 'congiunzione tra quello che è stato e quello che sarà.'<sup>57</sup> The product of this project of artistic regeneration cannot but be a modern art, that is an art which is 'aderent[e] allo stato attuale della vita italiana.'<sup>58</sup> As a consequence -Soffici declares- the spiritual tendency which will define the new modernity will be "classical" ('classico si potrebbe perciò definire il movimento spirituale che è nei nostri voti'<sup>59</sup>), within a notion of *classicità* interpreted as the awareness on the part of the artist of belonging to a specific time, which should imply his conscious participation in the life of his society and should lead him to follow a



set of fundamental rules designed to create order. Soffici here shifts the discourse from aesthetics to politics: the adjective *classico* not only refers to a notion of art as socially engaged, but it also defines respect for political and moral order. Dante, Machiavelli, Parini, Foscolo, Leopardi, Manzoni, Carducci, Giotto, Michelangelo, Leonardo Da Vinci, Canova, Palestrina and Verdi are cited as examples of *classicità*, as these artists are defined as ‘partecipanti innovatori nell’ordine, [...] classici per nulla retori, non in contrasto con lo spirito del loro tempo, ma anzi tutti penetrati di quello spirito, e generalmente congiunti nell’anima e intimamente e cordialmente alla vita del loro paese.’<sup>60</sup>

Having attributed to the concept of *classicità* a trans-historical character and having detached it from a specific style, the notion of “going back” to *classicità* becomes meaningless and the classical becomes an attribute of modernity, as it is presented as a function of “order” throughout the centuries. A new notion of artistic modernity is therefore created, which far from being associated with pre-war futurist anarchy, is defined in terms of classical order.

In the second half of the 1920s Soffici continues his project of integration between aesthetics and politics in the pages of *Il Selvaggio*. Together with Maccari, he becomes the other major contributor to the periodical and one of the founding fathers of Strapaese. He starts writing in *Il Selvaggio* in 1926 and his specific role within the periodical is to define the aesthetics of the Strapaese movement. Although Renzo De Felice suggests that Soffici ‘non [...] si può arruolare in Strapaese’<sup>61</sup>, he nonetheless possesses, as Ruggero Jacobbi points out, ‘una certa maniera di intendere il tempo, che è la maniera del contadino’, which ‘serve da controllo stilistico e recupero di tradizioni, da scoperta di un agio di parola contro le nevrastenie e le

ipertensioni d'avanguardia; negli anni servirà ad esorcizzarle quasi completamente, come un passato quasi colpevole da dimenticare.'<sup>62</sup>

Jacobbi also argues that as far back as in *Lemmonio Boreo* the balance between the opposing ideological positions of cosmopolitan avant-gardism and provincial ruralism -coexisting in Soffici up to then- is broken in favour of the second, and that 'stava nascendo il "trastullo di *Strapaese*", stava nascendo il *Selvaggio*'<sup>63</sup>. It is also interesting to notice that is precisely in the introduction to one of Soffici's works, *Battaglia Fra Due Vittorie*, written in 1923, that Malaparte (then Suckert) inserts an idyllic description of the Tuscan area, from which Soffici and Malaparte come, that is already pervaded by what will constitute the *Strapaese* atmosphere :

Fra toscani ci s'intende, tanto più che tu sei un toscano del Poggio, io della Retaia [...] le nostre case stan dirimpetto, e si guardano attraverso la pianura di Prato venata di bianche strade polverose e di gore maestre: i nostri paesi si scambian l'aria, i suoni, gli odori, in certe stagioni par quasi anche la luce, col vento che si rimandano da una collina all'altra: con la tramontana, che vien giù fischiando per la val di Bisenzio e traversa la conca a zufolar nelle canne delle tue vigne a Poggio a Caiano, e con lo scirocco, vento di mare che i Pratesi chiamano "vento di sotto", o del Poggio. V'è tanto, anche nella natura e nei capricci del nostro felice paese toscano, da imparentarci, se non per via di sangue, per modo terrestre.<sup>64</sup>

Soffici's argument within *Il Selvaggio* is conducted in parallel to Maccari's polemic and is meant to reinforce it using his authority as an established and respected artist. As with Maccari, Malaparte and the other *selvaggi*, his starting point is the creation of an artistic dichotomy between Classicism and Romanticism as expressions of two opposing spirits, one belonging to the Latin/catholic and the other to the northern/Protestant civilizations. Being the product of a specific culture, art reflects the same characteristics as politics : Soffici, therefore, defines artistic



Romanticism as ‘uno sviluppo lirico e morale dell’idealismo germanico’, an ‘estetica di derivazione protestante’<sup>65</sup> which as

un’illazione, o conseguenza del principio luterano del libero esame, non ammette per l’arte altre norme all’infuori di quelle che intuitivamente stabilisce, *col fatto stesso della propria espressione*, il cosiddetto genio individuale dell’artista. Perciò tanti geni, tante arti poetiche ; che è quanto dire : sfrenato individualismo creativo e negazione implicita di ogni tradizione, di ogni regola di giudizio, come di qualsiasi funzione sociale dell’arte, nel senso che questa possa avere una qualche influenza connettiva fra gli uomini di una medesima comunità.<sup>66</sup>

Absolute freedom and individualism on the part of artists leads to their detachment from reality (what Soffici calls ‘realtà comunemente apparente’) as the subject matter of their art, since their imagination is made completely autonomous. Hence the artistic anarchy and the abstractionism of modern artistic schools, such as Romanticism, Naturalism, *Verismo*, Symbolism, *Fauvisme*, Cubism, Futurism, Expressionism, *Negrismo*, Neo-classicism, Dadaism and Surrealism (these schools started flourishing after the French Revolution, from whose principles, he argues, they derive). The same spirit applied to politics generates, in Soffici’s words, ‘libertarismo, [...] ribellismo individualistico, [...] anarchia.’<sup>67</sup>

The notion that Soffici opposes to this ethics/aesthetics of Protestant origin is a concept of classicism which is at the same time artistic and political, being the expression of the Latin civilization, handed down from the Greeks to the Italians through the Romans. This “Latin spirit” is such that ‘il bello, il buono ed il vero non possono andare separati senza la rovina dell’arte e della vita sociale ; [...] anzi, formano un armonico tutto.’<sup>68</sup> Artistic classicism, therefore, being the product of this ‘filosofia sana’, pursues perfection of forms and uses reality as its subject matter. The love for the real and the pursuit of formal perfection as the product of the equation



‘bello-buono-vero’ -which Soffici had already identified in the early Twenties<sup>69</sup>- leads to the creation of a close link between aesthetics and politics. As Soffici points out, ‘Da Guido Cavalcanti a Pascoli, da Giotto a Fattori, alcun grande scrittore o artista vero Italiano ha mai fatto eccezione a questa regola immortale. Così i nostri costumi nazionali, la nostra politica si sono sempre avvantaggiati della estetica veramente nostra.’<sup>70</sup>

Soffici retrieves the concept of “civic art” as an art that is conceived of as ‘surrogato dell’azione’ and inserts Dante, Petrarch, Manzoni, Leopardi, Carducci and D’Annunzio in this tradition of “engaged” art, which he defines as specifically Italian. Romanticism, ‘tedeschismo’ and the consequent anarchy deriving from them are considered responsible for the introduction into Italy of the vacuous and disengaged genres of bourgeois literature, such as ‘il romanzucolo erotico, il drammuccio borghese, il drammone cromolitografico-medioevale, [...] la novelluzza stramba, bisbetica e vuota, la poesia giornalistica degli avanguardisti, il teatro nevrastenico e trasognato dei russofili, le litanie sceme dei falsi cristiani, le false pazzere delle dei nostri dadaisti provinciali’<sup>71</sup>, all of which are classified as rigorously “anti-Italian”.

The redefinition of the concept of tradition becomes, in this theoretical context, essential for the operation of relating the artists to both a political and an artistic past of which they should see themselves as products and continuers. The past assumes in Soffici’s writing an ethical connotation, as a measure against which artists should constantly define themselves, both aesthetically and politically. The artistic tradition is re-read by Soffici as a process of definition of the idea of *italianità* throughout the centuries, which artists cannot ignore in their individual process of self-definition as modern.

As classicism is defined by Soffici not only in formal, but also in political terms -as the essence of *italianità*- then neo-classicism is to be deplored as yet another expression of Romanticism in its decadent imitation of classical forms or, even worse, ‘nulla addirittura, come nulla significherebbe, per esempio, la parola neovitalismo, dato che la vita, sia quella delle cose, sia quella dell’arte, non comporta l’aggettivo nè di nuova nè di vecchia...’<sup>72</sup> The classical is conceived of as a quality in art -and therefore a category- as opposed to mere form, which is represented by neo-classicism. Since the classical is a quality, it assumes a moral value, as does the non-classical:

se per esempio un individuo si rivelerà esteticamente romantico, artificioso, decadente, è lecito arguire ch’egli sarà per necessità moralmente indisciplinato, malsano, come, politicamente, sarà sovversivo ed anarchico, anche quando egli s’illuda di parteggiare per l’ordine costituito, per l’armonia sociale e per il principio d’autorità.<sup>73</sup>

As regards Soffici’s notion of tradition, in an essay on Soffici’s *Taccuini*<sup>74</sup> Silvio Ramat observes that since the task of tradition is for Soffici the ‘omogeneizzazione degl’interni dissidi’, the result is ‘un’immagine edulcorata e composta della tradizione, banalizzata’, probably ‘ad uso del popolo’. Tradition is described by Soffici as the “personality of a people” and personality is memory: ‘Il popolo che tradisce la propria tradizione cessa di essere se stesso’. ‘Ma’, Ramat continues, ‘si comprende che il “tradimento” in questione può essere, ed è, anche (soprattutto) quello perpetrato dalle avanguardie: sono esse a spezzare la “personalità costante”, a frastornare la “memoria” di cui parla Soffici...’<sup>75</sup> The “other”, the “different” represented by the avant-garde is repressed by Soffici in an operation of delegitimation of abstract in favour of neo-figurative art, ‘evidenza di



vita naturale e di sentimento', where the importance attributed to the recognizability of the object of artistic representation is in function of the political/ethical value attributed to aesthetics. Ramat again points out that

l'estetica pedagogica, o banalpopolare [...] fa la sua vittima più cospicua proprio nell'*oggetto*, qualitativamente parlando [...] Requisito estetico indispensabile è la traducibilità dell'oggetto in oggetto popolare, vale a dire in realtà mimetica d'altra -e data- realtà [...] Dove insomma l'oggetto non appare immediatamente formato, "ben fatto", dove esso non sembra - come volgarmente- si dice *vero*, lì allora manca la coerenza drammatica, s'esprime al massimo l'istinto decorativo, tipico della "media" contemporanea.<sup>76</sup>

Certainly one of the most conspicuous results of the process of redefinition of aesthetic notions in political terms carried out by Soffici in the 1920s is represented by his proposal of a programme for a corporate order of artists ('Per un ordinamento artistico corporativo. Schema'), published in *Il Selvaggio* on 30 November 1928. The necessity for a corporation of artists in the fascist state is linked by Soffici to the notion of a modernity and originality conceived of as "Italian" and it constitutes the final step towards the redefinition of modernity in terms of *italianità*, as opposed to a "European" concept of modernity based on the romantic legacy:

è un fatto che, se in ogni altro genere di originalità dovuta al disfrenamento dell'inventiva individuale romantica e sovvertitrice, l'Italia sempre, e per propria costituzione spirituale, la cederà ai popoli di altra civiltà, e invasati di dotta barbarie modernistica e meccanica, come il francese, il tedesco, ecc., nessun'altra nazione potrebbe oggi dare un esempio tanto magnifico di nuova arditezza insieme, di disciplina superiore, e di spontaneo ritorno alle migliori e più splendide tradizioni paesane. [...]

Ponendosi sul terreno che le è proprio, fuori dei cerebralismi, delle perversioni del gusto, delle trovate ciarlatanesche, delle mode effimere, riacquisterebbe la sua salute secolare e la sua invincibilità. Giacché quando l'Italia pone come valori assoluti i valori italiani è imbattibile.<sup>77</sup>



Such 'ordinamento', Soffici claims, would constitute evidence of Italian originality with regard to the relationship between the arts and national and social life.

It could be said that the culmination and synthesis of Soffici's process of redefinition of modernity/tradition/*classicità* is represented by his *Periplo dell'arte* (1928), a work defined by Adamson as 'the most important statement of his views on art and cultural politics in these years and his last major attempt to formulate an aesthetics'.<sup>78</sup> And as the last section of the book is devoted to the definition of fascist art, the whole work seems to be, to a certain extent, constructed around the final section. However, *Periplo dell'arte* also represents a synthesis and a systematization of Soffici's aesthetic theorization throughout the Twenties. The author himself defines his work as a 'richiamo all'ordine', in particular, 'all'ordine italiano': since Europe, in fact, is in a general state of decadence and is rapidly moving towards 'quella forma di totale imbarbarimento che, con termine riassuntivo, può esser detto balcanico',<sup>79</sup> Italy is seen as the nation best suited to 'arginare [la] generale corsa al precipizio e ricondur tutti sul retto cammino - che è poi quello da lei in altri tempi tracciato e da lei battuto sicuramente fino al secolo scorso' (*Periplo*, p. 7). In particular, he concentrates on the analysis of certain artistic movements and he once again focuses on the definition of the concepts of *classicità*, realism, artistic *Italianità*, tradition and modernity.

The first concept to be the object of critique and redefinition is the concept of modernity. The second section of the book, entitled *Le fisime della modernità* opens with a provocative statement: '*Il faut être absolument moderne*, diceva Gustavo Courbet: e diceva una sciocchezza o una banalità'. (*Periplo*, p. 10). He then proceeds to explain

Diceva una sciocchezza se intendeva che l'artista deve idolatrare il proprio tempo ed ammirarne gli spiriti. La storia c'insegna che i più grandi creatori hanno sempre fatto il contrario: hanno sempre cioè disprezzato il proprio tempo [...]

Diceva una banalità, se intendeva che nell'opera dell'artista deve rispecchiarsi lo spirito del tempo nel quale egli vive. Giacché, in questo senso, a nessuno è possibile non essere moderno, cioè del tempo suo. (*Periplo*, p.10)

As a work of art is necessarily “modern”, in the sense that it reflects the spirit of its time, Soffici argues that the current definition of modernity focuses only on the particular, exceptional, transient aspects of an historical moment. If modernity is considered the most important feature of a work of art and if it is defined in terms of transience, then, Soffici argues, the best works of each epoch will be those reflecting even the decadent, immoral, academic, artificial, mannered aspects of it. This is absurd, as ‘la verità è che un’opera d’arte è più bella, più grande, assolutamente parlando, e più vitale e immarcescibile, quanto meno ritrae dell’aura transitoria dominante nel momento in cui fu creata.’ (*Periplo*, p. 13) The real work of art is therefore, according to Soffici, precisely the one that transcends the “modern” as transitory and is, for this reason, timeless. In fact in *Periplo dell’arte* Soffici still uses Baudelaire’s definition of modernity, as he had done in *Primi principi di un’estetica futurista*; however, while in *Primi principi* he had claimed that the transient character was as essential to the work of art as its eternal aspect and he had declared that ‘chi non è alla moda e moderno è fuori dell’arte viva’,<sup>80</sup> in *Periplo* he reverses his judgement, rejecting the value of the modern aspect of art, in the name of a retrieved *classicità*. However, even in his most intransigent classicist theorization, Soffici does not completely rule out modernity, but rather attempts to propose an alternative definition for the concept, which is closely connected to the attempt to define *Italianità*. His ‘richiamo all’ordine’ is therefore presented not only as a return to

national artistic tradition but as an attempt at redefining the essence of such tradition precisely in function of that necessity for order. Hence the claim that

tutto ciò che in arte è nebuloso, disordinato, astratto, decadente, romantico non è Italiano. Tutto quanto si scosta dal “naturale” non è Italiano. Il principio che ha sempre informato, che informa e che informerà l’arte Italiana (come il pensiero e la vita Italiana) è questo : Realismo. (*Periplo*, p. 51)

Realism, however, is not to be interpreted as unoriginal reproduction of nature. It is rather to be conceived of as the perception of the totality constituted by matter and spirit, external and internal world, subject and object. Soffici once again mentions the great masters of Italian tradition -Giotto, Masaccio, Raphael, Titian- as examples of “realist” painters, as they represented a reality informed with the sentiment that such reality inspires. Since these are also -Soffici claims- the conditions of classicism, such painters are defined as “classical”. Once again, the approach to the definition of a style is methodological rather than formalistic. According to Soffici, realism is not ‘verismo’ (the impersonal and photographic representation of reality “as it is”), nor naturalism (the use of an almost scientific method in order to produce not so much a work of art, but rather a “document”), nor ‘trivialismo’ (that is, the claim that the aim of art is to ‘*braver l’honnêteté*’ and therefore to have a preference for the representation of the most vulgar and deformed aspects of reality). These interpretations are erroneous, as they are based on a fundamentally “materialistic” conception of art. Realism is to be interpreted as a “synthesis” between the visible form of external reality and the artist’s ideal of beauty, which is obtained through the superimposition of the artist’s style on the raw material constituted by external reality. Soffici’s use of the term “synthetic realism”



is meant to contrast '[la] copia pedestre del vero da una parte, e dall'altra [il] puro astrattismo fantastico (che sono i due errori estremi della falsa arte contemporanea).'

(*Periplo*, p. 61) "Synthetic realism" does therefore represent an opposition to avant-garde and naturalistic tendencies but at the same time is to be considered almost as a purified synthesis of their legacy. However, it is also used as a synonym for classicism, as 'classicismo non è che questo: il perfetto connubio e equilibrio tra corpulenza e spiritualità, tra oggetto e soggetto, tra sensitività e volontà stilistica: vitalità totale artistica...' (*Periplo*, p. 61) Such equilibrium has always informed Italian art, whose main aesthetic principle has always been, Soffici claims, the imitation of nature. But again "imitation" is not to be interpreted as mere copying of the visible, but rather as a reproduction of the laws of harmony and order that rule nature and are innate in human beings. Only by following these rules can art perform its cognitive function ('l'arte [...] non è altro che un modo di conoscere la verità del mondo e di sé con più profondità che non permetta la scienza', *Periplo*, p. 81) and be intelligible to everybody, as it satisfies the taste and the desire for beauty that is common to all men 'e specialmente agli uomini di una stessa stirpe.' (*Periplo*, pp. 80-81) As the supreme function of art is seen as the expression and revealing of a civilization, so that it could spread and survive, then art is considered as a manifestation of the human instinct for self-preservation. But in order to fulfil this function art

deve attingere profondamente alle sorgenti del popolo da cui nasce, penetrarsi tutta della realtà di cui le è mestieri ispirarsi ; mostrarsi alla luce come una creatura legittima ingenerata nelle viscere della madreterra nazionale. [...] In ciò risiede il vero senso della tradizione e della sua necessità. (*Periplo*, p. 81)

Soffici once again establishes the equation *classicità/Italianità/tradizione* : classical, that is realist, art is the ultimate and only expression of the true Italian tradition. This tradition is to be restored in order to carry out a project of national regeneration. However, such a project can only be supported by a “religious” sense of art, since -Soffici claims- ‘ogni rinascimento ha avuto origine da una riviviscenza di religione, o dal ritorno all’adorazione della realtà naturale.’ (*Periplo*, p. 79)<sup>81</sup> He maintains that

non si dà arte veramente grande all’infuori dell’arte religiosa. La fede religiosa, oltre ad essere un incentivo all’entusiasmo del cuore ed al fuoco della fantasia dell’artista, è un fattore capitale di unità, di coesione tra i vari elementi di cui si compone un popolo e una civiltà, e perciò tra esso popolo ed il genio che ne interpreta lo spirito. (*Periplo*, pp. 75-76)

This concept of classicism, which historically characterizes the Italian tradition, is opposed to the notion of “bourgeois art”, considered inferior to great classical art. In the section entitled *Arte Borghese* Soffici focuses in particular on Flemish and French Naturalist painting. As regards Flemish painting Soffici notices how Foscolo considered it, ‘pedestre e volgaruccia’: likewise, Soffici considers ‘pedestre e volgaruccia’ French naturalist art, which he reads as inspired by Flemish painting. The reason why this kind of art is ‘scesa a un livello di inferiorità ideale rispetto alla precedente’, he argues, is because

è sempre stata fin dai suoi inizi un’arte per borghesi e borghese. Essa non ha mai cercato l’ispirazione nei fasti e nei simboli augusti della religione o negli splendori del mito, e neanche nei fasti di una società altamente civilizzata: essa si è invece sempre ispirata alla vita comoda, onesta ma piccola dei privati e a quella più meschina ancora del popolo, e l’ha fatto adattandosi ai gusti casalinghi degli uni e dell’altro. (*Periplo*, p. 68)

What Soffici questions here is the notion of an art, of North-European origin and bourgeois inspiration, which, precisely because of its bourgeois character, represents the antithesis to the quality of *classicità* specific to Italian tradition. Once again, since *classicità* acquires a moral value, it is set against a modernity defined in terms of bourgeois decadence and corruption of values.<sup>82</sup> The only merit attributed to Naturalism is of a technical nature, as with its interest in details of everyday life it contributed to perfect techniques of representation. However, Soffici continues, the rebirth of art, after such decadence, will depend on ‘un cambiamento totale del modo di concepire il mondo e la sua bellezza: e quindi dei criteri estetici che devono guidare l’artista.’ (*Periplo*, p. 69) As Flemish and French painting was essentially naturalistic and bourgeois, whereas the principles informing Italian painting have always been exactly the opposite,<sup>83</sup> it is necessary, Soffici argues, to retrieve the creative spirit of Italian art, in order to recover its greatness and beauty and, above all, its civil function. He defines Italian art as an art ‘di essenza popolare’ where ‘popolare’ means ‘schietto, sano, realistico e religiosamente attinente al profondo spirito della razza.’ (*Periplo*, p. 109) This popular essence has been historically imposed on art not only by the genuine and sincere character of “Italianness” but also by the formative and civil function that art has always pursued in Italian culture. It is precisely because of this function that Italian art has always preferred ‘la chiarezza, la naturalezza e l’evidenza genuina delle forme e delle immagini.’ (*Periplo*, p. 109) Clarity of forms and adherence to reality are the traits that distinguish Italian art from that of other nations (Soffici mentions France in particular), born as expression of the bourgeoisie and intended to appeal to bourgeois taste.

It is in name of this quest for a return to realism that Soffici opposes



Impressionism<sup>84</sup> and to post-impressionist avant-garde movements (such as Cubism, Dadaism, Futurism, Surrealism, Expressionism) and to neo-classicism, all without distinction described as forms of *accademia*, that is ‘il prevalere delle teorie e delle formule [...] sulla ingenua virtù poetica e rappresentativa.’ (*Periplo*, p. 103) In this “anti-academic” sense, Impressionism represents a return to such “representative ingenuousness” and is seen as part and indeed the culmination of an artistic restoration begun with the naturalist school. The impressionists are therefore defined as the continuers of a tradition described as ‘un succedersi di rivoluzioni e di ribellioni al falso e al manierato delle scuole, per riabbeverarsi alla natura genuina, fonte incorruttibile ed eterna di vita e di bellezza.’ (*Periplo*, p. 102)<sup>85</sup>

The last section of *Periplo dell'arte* is significantly entitled *Arte fascista* and it could be considered not only the culminating part of the short treatise but also the conclusive stage of Soffici's aesthetic theorization in the 1920s. In *Periplo dell'arte* he confirms his stance against a state art defined as such ; however, he once again claims that it is necessary to acknowledge the possibility and the necessity of a fascist art, of which he proceeds to enumerate the characteristics. The list is significantly preceded by a summary of the main characteristics of fascism:

1. La Patria o Nazione è una realtà da cui un popolo non può prescindere [...]
2. Spirito di religione [...] deve animare la vita sociale dell'Italia fascista [...]
3. La tradizione non può essere negata, essendo che tradizione significa legittimità di origini, continuità di sviluppo, giustificazione naturale e necessaria dell'orgoglio di stirpe, continuità di storia e perciò spiegazione e legittimazione della nostra personalità nazionale. [...] tradizione vuol dire proprio questo: continuità di sviluppo, ma tenendo fede a quella personalità storica che distingue l'Italia da ogni altra nazione [...]
4. Il Fascismo non è né reazione né sovvertimento, ma ritrovamento, attraverso la rivoluzione, della ragion d'essere e dell'ordine propri del popolo Italiano [...]

5. La civiltà dell'Italia fascista deve essere una civiltà fondata sulla salute morale, sull'equilibrio intellettuale, sulla probità e sulla saggezza.
  6. Il Fascismo è realista e non mistico o visionario [...]
  7. Il Fascismo è rurale, e perciò nemico del panindustrialismo [...]
- (*Periplo*, pp. 138-139)

According to these principles fascist art is defined as

1. an art informed by national spirit, with specific Italian features which make it different from the art of any other country;
2. an art animated by a religious sense and by spiritual austerity. In particular, it has to reflect the essence of Catholicism, which is 'grandiosità, nobiltà morale, bellezza di forme, equilibrio e misura...' (*Periplo*, p. 139);
3. an art which does not betray the Italian tradition, but at the same time reflects the spirit of the time;
4. an art which should not be the product of a reactionary or subversive attitude but of the retrieval, through the experience of revolution, of the true Italian artistic character, constant in Italian art from Greek and Roman times to the nineteenth century, when such a character was forgotten and repudiated;
5. an art that reveals 'sanità di mente e di sensi in chi la fa, dirittura e larghezza intellettuale, onestà di intenti e di attuazione tecnica, saggezza e serenità estetica.' (*Periplo*, p. 140);
6. an art that must adhere to reality and be the glorification of visible and sensory reality;
7. finally, an art that should find its inspiration in nature, the countryside and 'tutto quanto sa di etnicamente nativo, spontaneo, grave, e che è nostro fondamentalmente' (*Periplo*, p. 141).

This description of what should be the essence of fascist art implies a rejection

of all the forms of the Italian and European avant-garde in the name of a redefined notion of *classicità*. It could be said that indeed this description of fascist art represents the final stage of the process of gradual recovery of realism, of redefinition of artistic “Italianness” and its moral connotation, and of identification of all these elements with the notion of “classical”.

It is noticeable how, through the redefinition of concepts such as tradition, modernity and *classicità*, by the end of the 1920s Soffici’s discourse has shifted from the notion of autonomous art to a concept of art whose theoretical foundation is inextricably intertwined with politics. Such a shift creates a particular ambiguity, as it is possible to notice a peculiar merging of aesthetics and politics to such an extent as to make it almost impossible to identify to what extent Soffici’s concept of fascist art is based on established fascist principles (of which they can only be the necessary consequence) or if, as a matter of fact, the version of fascism he presents is constructed around a specific concept of art, which has emerged already in the immediate post-war period and whose theorization had progressively permeated the artistic scene in Italy. The former hypothesis refutes the many connections between fascism and certain aspects of the avant-garde and the possibility -on which especially Futurism insists- for avant-garde art to be the artistic expression of fascist ideology. The latter hypothesis confirms the theory that sees fascism as ‘the politicisation of Italian modernism’<sup>86</sup> and acknowledges the importance of the connections between fascism and Italian modernist culture. In Soffici’s operation, however interpreted, it is possible to notice the close interconnection and indeed the merging of aesthetic concepts and political values, which makes possible the development of a project of artistic regeneration which combines revolution and



order. In this context, for instance, the extraordinary aesthetic ambiguity of Soffici's contribution to the debate on fascist art promoted by *Critica Fascista*<sup>87</sup> is not to be interpreted exclusively (as it might be tempting to do) as intellectual opportunism, but it is also to be read in the light of such a cultural project. Soffici's position is, once again, appropriately summarised by Walter Adamson:

Soffici's definition of fascism as a 'movement aimed at a total regeneration' rather than as a 'political party', made it virtually coterminous with modernism. Yet how could it be modernist and still effect a return to order? Here Soffici attempted to balance the idea that fascism ought to 'love the past and antiquity' with the commitment not to make it 'an enemy of modernity'.<sup>88</sup>

Adamson also stresses how Soffici's project and his involvement with fascism can to a certain extent be seen as the expression of a contradictory relationship with modernity. He points out that 'to save the social conditions in which genuine art was possible necessarily meant supporting the religiosity of Italian fascism [...] against the scourge of atheist materialism arriving from across the Atlantic.'<sup>89</sup> With Soffici, as with many intellectuals, it seems that after the war established notions of modernity, normally associated with urbanisation, mechanisation and technological progress are not adequate to represent the new Italian reality. Such forces, in fact seem -to an artist like Soffici- to threaten rather than inspire genuine artistic creation and are perceived as alien to Italian tradition and culture. After all, the ultimate aim of Soffici's involvement in politics seems to be the necessity of safeguarding beauty, as he states as early as 1920 :

nel momento attuale, più che in qualunque altro, i fatti di ordine politico sono spesso così strettamente aderenti, o minacciano di divenirlo, a quelli spirituali ed estetici, da doverli per forza prenderli in considerazione per metterne in chiaro i rapporti, e, a un bisogno, far del nostro meglio per

modificarli a vantaggio, o a minor minaccia, almeno, dell'intelligenza e della bellezza.<sup>90</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Preface to Ardengo Soffici, *Estetica e politica. Scritti critici 1920-1940*, ed. by Simonetta Bartolini (Chieti : Solfanelli, 1994), p. 9. Michele Ciliberto claims that 'il problema di Soffici, per parti non trascurabili, coincide col problema del nostro Novecento.' Cfr. 'Le idee di Soffici' in *Ardengo Soffici : un bilancio critico*, ed. by Marino Biondi (Firenze : Festina-Lente, 1990), p. 67.

<sup>2</sup> Cited in *Estetica e politica*, p. 11.

<sup>3</sup> Among other periodicals, Soffici contributed to *Il Leonardo*, *La Voce*, *Lacerba*, *Valori Plastici*, *La Vraie Italie*, *La Ronda*, *L'Esame*, *Lo Spettatore Italiano*, *Il Selvaggio*, *Critica Fascista*, *Il Tevere*, *La Gazzetta del Popolo*, *Il Frontespizio*, and he founded his own periodical, *Rete Mediterranea*, a quarterly review of which he was the editor and only contributor between March and December 1920 and which had sections devoted to literature, criticism, philosophy and politics.

<sup>4</sup> *Avant-Garde Florence. From Modernism to Fascism* (Cambridge, Massachusetts and London : Harvard University Press, 1993), p. 247.

<sup>5</sup> According to the indications given by Soffici in the 1920 edition. Cfr. Ardengo Soffici, *Primi principi di un'estetica futurista*, in *Opere*, vol. I (Firenze: Vallecchi, 1959), p. 741.

<sup>6</sup> Before being published as a whole by Vallecchi in 1920, sections of *Primi principi di un'estetica futurista* had been published in *La Voce* between February and December 1916, in *La Raccolta* between June and August 1918 and *Valori Plastici* in the November-December 1919 issue.

<sup>7</sup> Giovanni Papini, 'Futurismo e Marinettismo', *Lacerba*, n. 7, 1915, in *Marinetti e i futuristi*, ed. by Luciano De Maria (Milano : Garzanti, 1994), p. 287.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 286.

<sup>9</sup> Giovanni Papini, 'Futurismo e marinettismo', in *Per conoscere Marinetti e il futurismo*, p. 285. The article was initially published in *Lacerba*, III, n.7, 1915.

<sup>10</sup> *Per conoscere Marinetti e il futurismo*, p. XXXVII.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>13</sup> Ardengo Soffici, 'Primi principi di una estetica futurista', in *Archivi del Futurismo*, ed. by Maria Drudi Gambillo and Teresa Fiori, Roma : De Luca, 1958, p. 557).

<sup>14</sup> Giuliana Tomasella points out that Soffici's futurist experience can be seen almost as a parenthesis within the continuity of his artistic development. She argues that although he was not entirely convinced about the real artistic value of Futurism, he supported it as he believed that it could invigorate Italian art and bring it nearer to the truly modern Parisian art. Futurism was supported by Soffici only in function of a possible retrieval of the genuinness and purity of Italian art. *Italianità* is therefore the fundamental principle to be found at the core of Soffici's speculation on Futurist aesthetics. Cfr. Giuliana Tomasella, *Avanguardia in crisi nel dibattito artistico fra le due guerre*, (Padova: Cluep, 1995), p. 45.

<sup>15</sup> Cfr. 'Primi principi', p. 563: 'L'arte è una convenzione, ma i suoi termini vogliono essere reali e concreti. Un altro forte argomento contro il puro astrattismo è questo, che le forme concepibili per via della sola immaginazione sono limitate e schematiche, mentre la realtà ne offre un numero illimitato e in rapporto sempre diverso fra loro; il che genera la varietà infinita, la sorpresa e quindi il massimo godimento e soddisfazione estetica.'

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 564.

<sup>18</sup> 'Primi principi', p. 564.

<sup>19</sup> 'Primi principi', p. 565.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>22</sup> Charles Baudelaire, 'The Painter of Modern Life' in *Selected Writings on Art and Literature*, ed. and transl. by P. E. Charvet (London : Penguin, 1972), p. 403. The section *Arte e moda* of the *Primi principi* is obviously still strongly influenced by Baudelaire's theory of modernity -as expressed in the essay 'The Painter of Modern Life'- to such an extent as almost to paraphrase certain sections of it. On the relationship between Soffici and Baudelaire, cfr. Mario Richter, *La formazione francese di Ardengo Soffici* (Milano : Vita e Pensiero, 1969), pp. 103-121. See also Soffici's defence of Baudelaire against Papini's criticism of the French poet in *Giovanni Papini-Ardengo Soffici. Carteggio*, ed. by Mario Richter (Roma : Edizioni di Storia e Letteratura, 1991), pp. 285-335.

<sup>23</sup> 'Primi principi', p. 581.

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 566-567.

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 566.



<sup>27</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 568.

<sup>29</sup> Cfr. the three "axioms" formulated by Soffici in the section 'Libertà' of his *Primi principi*: 'Assioma 1° - L'arte non è una cosa seria. [...] Assioma 2° - L'arte non è venerabile e non deve incutere rispetto. [...] Assioma 3° - Non importa che l'arte si comprenda.' (*Primi principi*, pp. 569-570).

<sup>30</sup> 'Primi principi', p. 578.

<sup>31</sup> Cfr. Simonetta Bartolini, introduction to *Estetica e politica*, pp. 19-20.

Soffici declares that it was the war that clarified and to a certain extent changed some of his views. In a letter written in 1933 he confesses: 'La guerra [...] mi portò a riflettere, a sentire la responsabilità della mia missione, mi persuase della vanità dei giochi e delle squisitezze intellettuali ed estetiche; e specialmente mi dette il disgusto degli artifici e delle ingegnose trovate, che mi si rivelarono allora accademia ed arcadia di un altro genere.' Letter to Piero Buscaroli cited in Piero Buscaroli, 'Ritratto dal vero', in *L'uomo del poggio: Ardengo Soffici* (Roma: Volpe, 1979), p. 25.

<sup>32</sup> See note 3.

<sup>33</sup> Ardengo Soffici, 'Dichiarazione preliminare', *Rete Mediterranea*, March 1920, in *Estetica e politica*, p. 77.

<sup>34</sup> Ardengo Soffici, 'Apologia del futurismo', *Rete Mediterranea*, September 1920, in *Estetica e politica*, p. 122.

<sup>35</sup> 'disciplina intellettuale artistica e morale', 'Apologia del futurismo', p. 124.

<sup>36</sup> In a letter to Carlo Carrà written in 1913 he had declared: 'quello che fa di molti pittori francesi delle personalità poco importanti [...] è questo, ch'essi non hanno una concezione moderna dell'arte. Gli impressionisti erano molto più moderni. Essi sono arcaici e ora vorrebbero rigenerarsi riattaccandosi ai loro precursori. Il futurismo invece ha questo di buono, che cerca nel senso moderno. Se potremo cercare anche in un senso puramente Italiano arriveremo a dei buoni risultati.' Cited in Marco Moretti 'Del suo essere paesaggio', in *Ardengo Soffici. Un percorso d'arte*, ed. by Mario Cavallo (Milano: Mazzotta, 1994), p. 49.

<sup>37</sup> Giorgio Luti, preface to *Estetica e politica*, p. 7.

<sup>38</sup> 'Osservazioni intorno alla letteratura russa', initially published in *La Ronda* (March-April 1922), now in *Estetica e politica*, p. 127.

<sup>39</sup> 'Pensieri sull'arte', initially published in *L'Esame*, April 1922, now in *Estetica e politica*, p. 140.

<sup>40</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 141.

<sup>41</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>42</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 140.

<sup>43</sup> Introduction to *Estetica e politica*, p. 23.

<sup>44</sup> 'Pensieri sull'arte', p. 143.

<sup>45</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>46</sup> *Ibid.* p. 144.

<sup>47</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 144-145.

<sup>48</sup> 'Ritorni', *Rete Mediterranea*, June 1920, in *Estetica e politica*, p. 103.

<sup>49</sup> 'Mi resta da fare un'ultima osservazione che non è senza importanza; ancorché possa forse spiacciare alle persone del gruppo, cui non ho fatto fin qui che alludere senza nominarle, perché per me non si tratta di polemizzare con loro, ma soltanto di esaminare dei fatti e indicare qualche verità' ('Ritorni', p. 108). In a letter to Giuseppe Prezzolini, written in September 1920, Soffici explicitly reveals his feelings towards *La Ronda*'s work: 'Hai visto la *Ronda*? Cardarelli mi pregò di non fare polemiche: hanno un po' paura! Hai letto la pappolata leopardiana del grafomane?' In *Giuseppe Prezzolini - Ardengo Soffici. Carteggio*, ed. by M.E. Raffi and Mario Richter, 2 vols (Roma: Edizioni di Storia e Letteratura, 1982), I, pp. 13-14 (Soffici probably refers here to Bacchelli's *Paralipomeni della Batracomiomachia*, published in the June-July issue of *La Ronda*). As a matter of fact, Soffici contributes to *La Ronda* in 1922, which further confirms Cassieri's description of *La Ronda*'s founding group and its contributors as a group of the most disparate intellectual tendencies, often operating without a specific common denominator: 'Crociani, cattolici e agnostici, nazionalisti e cosmopoliti, sotto lo stesso liberalissimo tetto' (Giuseppe Cassieri, Introduction to *La Ronda 1919-1923*, Roma: ERI, 1969, p. XV).

<sup>50</sup> 'Roma-Napoli-Pompei', *Il Selvaggio*, 31 May 1926, in *Estetica e politica*, p. 168.

<sup>51</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 167.

<sup>52</sup> First published in *Lo Spettatore Italiano*, 1 March 1924.

<sup>53</sup> 'Spirito ed estetica del fascismo' in *Estetica e Politica*, p. 156.



<sup>54</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>55</sup> From a more strictly political point of view, Michele Ciliberto points out that Soffici's adherence to fascism is driven by a plurality of elements: 'l'elogio della violenza e della guerra, intesa come suscitatrice delle "volanti energie", come "creatrice di valori nuovi", "spargitrice di semi", "rivelatrice delle più gelosamente nascoste verità"; il primato della classe dirigente, del comando; la scelta monarchica; il drastico rifiuto, in chiave nettamente reazionaria, della "tradizione" giolittiana. E ovviamente, agisce un'opposizione radicale al bolscevismo e al comunismo intesi come ritorno alla barbarie primeva...' But, above all, Ciliberto stresses the importance of the qualities of *antimodernità*, *romanità*, *cattolicesimo* expressed by fascism, as an alternative to the crisis represented by the dissolution of the principles of order, hierarchy and authority, caused by the intrusion of protestant culture into mediterranean civilization. The reconstitution of civilization implies the dissolution of the subjectivity connected with North-European culture and the retrieval of objectivity in terms of harmony and *classicità* on the artistic as well as political and cultural levels. (Cfr. 'Le idee di Soffici', pp. 68-72)

<sup>56</sup> 'Spirito ed estetica del fascismo', in *Estetica e politica*, p. 160.

<sup>57</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>58</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>59</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>60</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 161.

<sup>61</sup> De Felice identifies in Soffici a critical attitude towards fascism which makes him -in his words- 'una voce de *Il Selvaggio*, ma non [...] certo *Il Selvaggio*'. Cfr. Renzo De Felice, 'Soffici, gli intellettuali e il fascismo', in *Ardengo Soffici. L'artista e lo scrittore nella cultura del 900*, edited by Geno Pampaloni, (Firenze: Centro Di, 1976), p.70.

<sup>62</sup> Ruggero Jacobbi, 'Ardengo Soffici fra tradizione e rinnovamento', in *Ardengo Soffici. L'artista e lo scrittore*, pp. 19-20.

<sup>63</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 28.

<sup>64</sup> Curzio Malaparte, 'Ragguaglio sullo stato presente degli intellettuali rispetto alle cose d'Italia', in *L'Italia Barbarica*, (Torino: Piero Gobetti Editore, 1925), p. 112. Walter Adamson has stressed the complexity that characterizes the relationship between Soffici and the notion of *toscanità*. In an essay on Soffici he points out that Soffici's concept of *toscanità* is the epiphenomenon of his nationalism and is in constant dialectical juxtaposition to his cosmopolitan (Parisian in particular) avant-gardism: 'By the end of World War I he had returned to a nationalist politics and his earlier embrace of *toscanità*, and this shift quickly led to a negative reevaluation of artistic avant-gardism. [...] the problem he was attempting to resolve with these continuous reevaluations was always the same [...] that problem was how to re-auratize art by locating the conditions within which art could once again express its religious essence for the community.' Cfr. 'Soffici and the religion of art', in *Fascist Vision. Art and ideology in France and Italy*, edited by Matthew Affron and Mark Antliff (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1997), pp. 65-66.

<sup>65</sup> A. Soffici, 'Semplicismi', *Il Selvaggio*, 30 January 1927, in *Estetica e politica*, p. 186.

<sup>66</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 185.

<sup>67</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 186.

<sup>68</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 187.

<sup>69</sup> Cfr. 'Pensieri sull'arte', *L'Esame*, April 1922.

<sup>70</sup> 'Semplicismi', *Il Selvaggio*, 30 January 1927, p. 187.

<sup>71</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 189.

<sup>72</sup> 'Semplicismi', *Il Selvaggio*, 15 February 1927, in *Estetica e politica*, p. 191.

<sup>73</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 191-192.

<sup>74</sup> 'Oggetto e genio nei Taccuini di Ardengo Soffici', in *Ardengo Soffici. L'Artista e lo scrittore*, pp. 113-191.

<sup>75</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 145.

<sup>76</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 146.

<sup>77</sup> Ardengo Soffici, 'Per un ordinamento artistico corporativo. Schema', *Il Selvaggio*, 30 November 1928, in *Estetica e politica*, pp. 255-256.

<sup>78</sup> 'Soffici and the religion...', p. 63.

<sup>79</sup> 'Periplo dell'arte', in *Opere*, vol. V (Firenze: Vallecchi, 1963), p. 7. Further references to this work are given after quotations in the text.

<sup>80</sup> *Primi principi*, p. 581.

<sup>81</sup> With regard to the development of the religious sense of art throughout Soffici's artistic career and

its interconnections with fascist ideology and aesthetics cfr. Walter Adamson, 'Soffici and the religion of art'. In particular, as far as *Periplo dell'arte* is concerned, Adamson stresses how Soffici felt that in recent years a "pure and healthy" conception of art had been threatened by such avant garde movements as Fauvism, Cubism, Futurism, which were the expression of urbanisation, consumerism and international commerce. Only by going back to their native countryside could artists restore the "religiosity" that characterized all great art. To be able to do so, Soffici argued that it was necessary to abandon "pure aesthetic" and restore art's heroic and religious mission as "the guide to the mystery of the divinity animating the universe". This could only be achieved by saving modern culture from the forces of urbanisation and consumerism and advocating a political function for art. (Cfr *Soffici and the religion...*, pp. 64-65)

<sup>82</sup> Regarding the notion of modernity as decadence, Soffici identifies modernity not only as a bourgeois expression but also as the expression of other "decadent" and "subversive" sections of society, in particular women, Jews and homosexuals, all characterized by 'sovversivismo ideale, e dunque negazione dell'austerità intellettuale, della costruttività morale e del genio virile.' (*Periplo*, p. 64)

<sup>83</sup> Earlier on in the section he defines Italian art as traditionally 'per nulla borghese per nulla naturalistica, ma aristocratica e religiosa.' (*Periplo*, p. 68)

<sup>84</sup> Soffici's had already dealt with Impressionism in a series of articles published in *La Voce* between April 1909 (entitled 'L'impressionismo e la pittura italiana', now published in *Opere*, vol. I, pp. 3-29) and May 1910 (entitled 'L'impressionismo a Firenze'), where he had praised the movement for being 'il vero emancipatore della pittura moderna da tutte le ridicole tirannie d'un passato professorale' and had enumerated the merits of Impressionism as being 'la ricerca dell'espressione, il ritorno all'investigazione diretta del vero, l'amore panteistico della natura, la libertà massima data allo spirito, lo sbaragliamento dei pregiudizi.' ('L'impressionismo e la pittura italiana', in *Opere*, vol. I, pp. 10-14)

<sup>85</sup> Here Soffici retrieves the notion of tradition as a succession of revolutions which he had already developed in *Primi principi*. In *Periplo* he goes so far in his appreciation as to define Impressionism as a 'scuola di derivazione Italiana in modo particolare.' Its character of synthesis, rapidity and quick inspiration is the expression of 'il fondo stesso della genialità pittorica Italiana', which is found in all Italian painting since Giotto (cfr. *Periplo*, p. 106).

<sup>86</sup> Cfr. Walter Adamson, 'Modernism and Fascism: The Politics of Culture in Italy, 1903-1922', *American Historical Review*, 95 (1990), 359-390.

<sup>87</sup> Cfr. Chapter 3.

<sup>88</sup> *Avant-Garde Florence. From Modernism to Fascism* (Cambridge, Massachusetts and London: Harvard University Press, 1993), p. 248.

<sup>89</sup> 'Soffici and the religion...', p. 65.

<sup>90</sup> Cited in Michele Ciliberto, 'Le idee di Soffici', p. 68.



## Chapter 6

### **LUIGI PRANDELLO BETWEEN TRADITION AND MODERNITY : THE THEORETICAL ESSAYS (1918-1934)**

During the 1920s, despite his substantial theoretical and critical activity and his notoriety as a writer and a playwright, Pirandello does not often directly participate in contemporary literary and critical debates. It is therefore, to a certain extent, difficult to place him within the context of the constant critical investigation and discussion of aesthetic concepts which characterizes the critical arena of those years. However, his theoretical essays show a particular attention devoted to the nature of the artistic medium, which strongly questions established aesthetic categories. Although not referring specifically to the concepts of tradition and modernity, the investigation conducted in Pirandello's essays is constantly concerned with a redefinition of aesthetic criteria that challenges contemporary views on art. Besides, the move beyond the concept of mimesis, which Pirandello promotes with his theatre, implies a revision of his relationship with preceding literary and theatrical models. Therefore, although Pirandello's essays are only tangentially related to the central topic of this study, they nonetheless present a different and authoritative critical perspective -whose significance can hardly be ignored- conducted in parallel to contemporary debates, on such issues as the nature and function of the artistic medium and its relationship with contemporary times, the definition of how the

“new” in art can be described, the relationship between artist and tradition, and the necessity of redefining the notion of the “modern”.

It must not be forgotten that Pirandello’s critical and theoretical essays were published in periodicals, magazines and newspapers, or were initially delivered as speeches. Therefore, although he does not directly participate in contemporary debates, he certainly contributes to that “culture of the debate” and that atmosphere of culture *in fieri* that characterizes his time.<sup>1</sup> As an established author and as a major representative of a form of modernity which is mostly associated with the European culture of his time, his views are regarded by his contemporaries as extremely influential and his theatre is often heavily criticized and attacked (for instance, by such movements as *Strapaese*). In addition, Pirandello’s adherence to fascism occasionally influences, although only superficially, some of his statements on art, thereby making him part of contemporary debates on the identity of fascist culture. The essays considered in this chapter are not analysed in the context of contemporary debates, but rather as contributions to the culture of the 1920s and as examples of Pirandello’s idiosyncratic interpretation of highly debated concepts in that decade, such as “the new” and “tradition”, and of the issue of creation *versus* representation.

The essays written between 1918 and 1934 represent the development of a thinking which started much earlier, therefore some of the themes treated in his essays present issues which could be associated with the European pre-war avant-garde. In particular Pirandello’s struggle throughout the period between the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century and the Thirties seems to be focused on the preservation of the value and the function of the “word”, and the literary word in particular. Pirandello’s route to modernity can therefore be seen as a process of the progressive redemption of art, which, redeemed from the mimetic function attributed to it by

Naturalism, is redefined in terms of the creation of a reality “more true” than reality itself. The emphasis is no longer on the function of representation in art but on its intrinsic capacity for creation.



**The essays on theatre: the relationship between reality, the word and theatrical activity**

tra tutti gli spettacoli che possono per un momento entrare nella vita di un popolo, il teatro è quello che ne assomma e rispecchia più intimamente i valori morali: il teatro è quello che resta.  
(*Discorso al Convegno "Volta" sul teatro drammatico, 1934*)

In his essay *Pirandello e la poetica della crisi* Robert Dombroski defines the main features of what he defines as "a culture of crisis" as belonging to 'una coscienza "modernistica" che, paradossalmente, reagiva contro il "moderno"'.<sup>2</sup> Those features are identified by Dombroski with some fundamental themes which can be summarised as follows<sup>3</sup> :

- historical pessimism, to be interpreted as the acute awareness of a "crisis of reason" in the sense that thought has become incapable of conceiving objectivity and therefore dismisses it as an illusion ;
- opposition to the "modern" world ;
- the idea that modern civilization prepares the conditions for a global dictatorship, which will not only be political but also spiritual and cultural ;
- existential barbarization brought about by the new prominence of the masses. The acknowledgement of the masses as a new social factor, which is seen at the same time as terrifying and fascinating : terrifying, because of its irrationality and violence ; fascinating because constituting a reserve of new energy ;
- anti-capitalism, anti-industrialism, a negative attitude toward science and machines.

Dombroski relates this cultural crisis on the one hand to the crisis of the petty bourgeoisie doomed to isolation and impotence by the development of industrial society, and on the other to the lack of any ideological function for the intellectual

and his estrangement from the processes 'di legittimazione e di consenso'. In this context, the role of the alienated and dispossessed is identified as twofold :

1. to be the negative critical conscience of his social class, by opposing the value of those liberal principles which have facilitated industrial development and the massification of society ;
2. to dramatize the deep feeling of vulnerability created by the loss of his traditional role of moral guide.

Anti-realism and anti-materialism become an expression of the historic crisis of the intellectual and are turned into a strategy to safeguard subjectivity, through its objectification and transformation into a universal value.<sup>4</sup> Art is turned into an "act of life". This can be read in terms of the reconciliation between art and life-praxis to which Peter Bürger refers in relation to avant-garde art.<sup>5</sup> In his book *Fascist Modernism* Andrew Hewitt points out how such a notion of art involves, on the part of the avant-garde artist, a rethinking of the paradigms of representation: the movement beyond mimesis, in fact, and the quest for reconciliation between art and life-praxis lead to a concept of art as creation of a reality, if not more real, certainly more *true* than sensory reality, thereby implying the participation by the artist in the creation of history.<sup>6</sup> Leone De Castris interprets this quest as the necessity on the part of the artists of re-establishing their position in a society which is progressively marginalizing them:

Sono risposte di uno "sguardo" deluso fino alla disperazione e al terrore, risposte alla disidentificazione che denuncia se stessa e cerca una identità, risposte ad una disorganicità che sogna una rifondata organicità e si risolve in una solitudine sempre più introvertita : risposte della coscienza, ipertrofiche, rese autonome da un mondo che non ascolta queste risposte. Ecco, il lusso, l'aristocrazia ideale, la purezza assoluta e l'antiutilitarismo intransigente della parola letteraria del Decadentismo. Sta di fronte al



mercato, alla massificazione dei valori, alla materialità e al cinismo della civiltà moderna, all'invadenza corruttrice della politica. Se dovessimo tentare una formula in qualche modo capace di riassumere questa autoposizione tragica dell'intellettuale primonovecentesco nella società industriale, potremmo dire che si tratta di questo tipo di opposizione : il potere della parola contro la parola del potere.<sup>7</sup>

Corrado Donati, although from a different angle, shares the idea expressed by De Castris of the necessity for the modernist artist of redefining himself as having privileged access to an absolute truth which can only be expressed through the medium of art. With particular reference to Pirandello's theatre he argues that

la chiave di volta del teatro pirandelliano sta appunto in questo : che la riflessione estetica dell'autore, muovendo da una analisi della realtà sociale come negazione del libero flusso vitale - che le convenzioni e le regole del comportamento umano arrestano di continuo nella fissità delle "forme" - finisce per proporre una concezione dell'arte come realtà alternativa, capace di superare proprio attraverso il processo della creazione formale l'ostacolo rappresentato dalla "forma".

Per giungere a questo si devono riconoscere alla forma peculiare dell'arte i caratteri di necessità, universalità e dinamicità intrinseca ; in altre parole si tratta di sostenere che essa è il luogo di una Verità assoluta. Il personaggio pirandelliano, tormentato da una scissione dell'io che si produce nel misconoscimento della sua identità da parte degli altri e sentendosi legato drammaticamente all'impossibilità di rimuovere la sbarra di questa incomunicabilità tra le coscienze, anela a divenire personaggio di teatro per acquisire, grazie al potere dell'arte, il riconoscimento del valore di verità alla propria realtà interiore.<sup>8</sup>

The notion of the "word" as the *locus* of truth is developed by Pirandello as early as 1899. In his essay *L'Azione Parlata*, Pirandello criticizes contemporary playwrights for conceiving the theatrical work as the product of the identification of two subsequent stages : the first stage consists in the identification of a "fact", a situation which they consider suitable for constituting the basis for a play and to which they calculatedly add external elements in order to create a plot. The second stage is constituted by the choice of the most suitable characters to represent such a



situation, with an eye to the possible actor for that specific role. Pirandello's criticism of such a way of constructing a play is based on the notion of art conceived of as "life" :

Così si fa. E nessuno pensa, o vuol pensare, che dovrebbe farsi proprio al contrario ; che l'arte è la vita e non un ragionamento ; che partire da un'idea astratta o suggerita da un fatto o da una considerazione più o meno filosofica, e poi dedurne, mediante il freddo ragionamento e lo studio, le immagini che le possano servir da simbolo, è la morte stessa dell'arte. Non il dramma fa le persone ; ma queste, il dramma. E prima d'ogni altro dunque bisogna aver le persone : vive, libere, operanti. Con esse e in esse nascerà l'idea del dramma, il primo germe dove staran racchiusi il destino e la forma ; ché in ogni germe già freme l'essere vivente, e nella ghianda c'è la quercia con tutti i suoi rami.<sup>9</sup>

In his seminal study on the young Pirandello's philosophical background Gösta Andersson<sup>10</sup> points out how *L'Azione Parlata* (among other essays) is influenced by the French philosopher Gabriel Séailles, to such an extent as to include in it substantial sections of Séailles's work *Le Génie dans l'Art*. Andersson reports Félix Ravaisson's definition of Séailles's philosophical orientation, as 'un réalisme ou positivisme spiritualiste, ayant pour principe générateur la conscience que l'esprit prend en lui-même d'une existence dont il reconnaît que toute autre existence dérive et dépend, et qui n'est autre que son action'- and he explains that it was a philosophical tendency which distanced itself from metaphysics, considering psychological matters as an expression of a spiritual reality to be investigated through empirical observation.<sup>11</sup>

What begins to emerge in the essay is a concept of art as life, in which the task of art is not to represent the real, but rather to recreate a reality, as Pirandello sees it, less real but more true<sup>12</sup>, thereby moving beyond Naturalism. In the context of such a

concept of art, words should have the ability to represent “the spoken action” :

Pirandello claims that the ‘prodigio d’arte’ can only happen on the condition that

si trovi [...] la parola che sia l’azione stessa parlata, la parola viva che muova, l’espressione immediata, connaturata con l’azione, la frase unica, che non può essere che quella, propria a quel dato personaggio in quella data situazione parole, espressioni frasi che non s’inventano, ma che nascono, quando l’autore si sia veramente immedesimato con la sua creazione fino a sentirla com’essa si sente, a volerla com’essa si vuole.<sup>13</sup>

The need to conceive art as an act of life, identified as early as 1899, informs all of Pirandello’s theorization on theatre and his conception of the artistic creation in general.

In his 1918 essay *Teatro e Letteratura*, Pirandello argues strongly against the contemporary notion of theatrical work, which has created confusion between ‘scrivere bene’ and ‘scrivere bello’ and therefore has profoundly questioned theatre’s position within the realm of literature. Contemporary playwrights -Pirandello claims- make the mistake of believing that ‘scrivere bene’ is equivalent to ‘scrivere bello’ : therefore, they do not write well, as writing well does not, according to their opinion, correspond to an idea of theatre in which the characters should not speak like *letterati*, but use instead an everyday colloquial language. The definition of what literature is, therefore, is associated by the professionals of theatre with a mere question of style, a question which, Pirandello claims, is posed in misleading terms, as it affects the whole notion of literary work. As they define literature exclusively according to stylistic and rhetorical criteria, any written text which does not conform to such criteria cannot be considered literature (and in the case of theatre in particular the literary label is actively rejected).

In opposition to such a tendency Pirandello argues that a “well written play” is not a play which is written in an excessively literary style (that would not in fact be ‘scrivere bene’ but ‘scrivere bello’), but rather a play where the characters speak according to their personalities and conditions in the various situations presented. This does not necessarily mean that their language will be ‘comune’ and not literary, but it will have that quality of appropriateness which will prevent it from being imprecise and therefore vulgarly careless. If so conceived, a play can be considered a piece of literature. However, the main fault of contemporary theatre is identified by Pirandello as being the persistence on the part of playwrights in following the aesthetic criteria of Naturalism, which ‘confuse il fatto fisico, il fatto psichico e il fatto estetico in tale graziosa maniera, che al fatto estetico venne a dare (almeno teoricamente, perchè in pratica non era possibile) quel carattere di necessità meccanica e quella fissità proprie del fatto fisico.’<sup>14</sup> The core of Pirandello’s position lies in a notion of art conceived of as a form of life, as the creation of a reality as real as sensory reality, which in turn is perceived as a shapeless flow, to which form is given according to different circumstances and occasions. What we perceive as material reality -everyday life- represents only a specific form of life. Art can be considered another and a different form of life. Given these premises, an aesthetics of mimesis cannot satisfy the criteria of such a concept of art :

l’arte, in qualunque sua forma (dico l’arte letteraria, di cui la drammatica è una delle tante forme) non è imitazione o riproduzione, ma *creazione*. [...] Non si tratta d’imitare o di riprodurre la vita ; e questo, per la semplicissima ragione che non c’è una vita che stia come una realtà per sé, da riprodurre con caratteri suoi propri : la vita è flusso continuo e indistinto e non ha altra forma all’infuori di quella che a volta a volta le diamo noi, infinitamente varia e continuamente mutevole.<sup>15</sup>



Life -Pirandello continues- is created by each individual for practical purposes according to personal or social interest, which necessarily involves restrictions on freedom. Only art can create freely, in the sense that it creates a reality which 'ha solamente in se stessa le sue necessità, le sue leggi, il suo fine'<sup>16</sup> and creates a work which, as distinct from nature, is not without an order and full of the contradictions that characterize life. Art has the power to concentrate and simplify reality, thereby creating 'un essere [...] meno reale e tuttavia più vero'.

However, according to Pirandello, theatre cannot but have a subordinate status in relation to literature, as theatrical work has already had 'la sua espressione definitiva, unica, nelle pagine dello scrittore'.<sup>17</sup> Such a unique, complete and autonomous "form" must be turned into matter, which, in turn will be transformed again into form by the actors, according to their means and capacity. It is necessary in fact for the actors to recreate the characters in themselves, in order for the constituent matter of the play to be made real on stage : '[a]nche per lui [l'attore], insomma, l'esecuzione bisogna che balzi viva dalla concezione, e soltanto per virtù di essa, per movimenti cioè promossi dall'immagine stessa, viva e attiva, non solo dentro di lui, ma divenuta con lui anima e corpo.'<sup>18</sup> Although elicited by the work of the writer, and therefore not spontaneously created by the actor, the "image", the created reality, can never be the same as that expressed in the written text by the playwright. It can only be an approximate version, but it will never be the same. Although the character on stage will reproduce the written text, that character will never be the one created by the writer, since the actor inevitably recreates it in himself and gives it his voice, his body, his gestures.

The question, therefore, is not whether the aesthetic criteria applied to literature should be equally applied to theatre, but rather whether theatre can satisfy *any*

aesthetic criterion. Pirandello specifies in fact that only the written play can be considered a work of literature: the work performed on stage can only be a “translation” -that is an interpretation- of the written text, and as such, is bound to be inferior to the original. As opposed to what the author achieves in the play -namely the creation of a superior reality, which is more “true” than sensory reality- the actor

rende [...] più reale e tuttavia men vero il personaggio creato dal poeta, gli toglie tanto, cioè, di quella verità ideale, superiore, quanto più gli dà di quella realtà materiale, comune; e lo fa men vero anche perché lo traduce nella materialità fittizia e convenzionale di un palcoscenico. L'attore insomma necessariamente dà una consistenza artefatta, in un ambiente posticcio, illusorio, a persone e ad azioni che hanno già avuto un'espressione di vita ideale, qual'è quella dell'arte e che vivono e respirano in una realtà superiore.<sup>19</sup>

In this sense, if the written text belongs to that “superior reality” of the realm of art which the stage performance can never attain, then theatre and literature should be considered as two separate categories and, as a consequence, playwrights should not be concerned about the text, as that should be in function of the stage performance, which is what Pirandello calls ‘la traduzione’. Whatever text is produced by the author should therefore be exclusively ‘materia per gli attori’, like the *scenari* of the *commedia dell'arte*. However, this type of text could only be written for a theatre conceived as ‘quel luogo dove si fanno rappresentazioni serali e diurne, con degli attori, a cui essi danno argomento e materia da formare quasi lì per lì in scene d'effetto, drammatiche e comiche.’<sup>20</sup> To such a concept of the theatre Pirandello opposes the statement -which concludes the essay- that for him ‘il teatro vuol essere un'altra cosa’.<sup>21</sup> The unspecified, open-ended character of the closing sentence suggests a reference to the quest for a new concept of theatre, one which could reconcile the fundamental diversity between the various components of a theatrical



work, from the written text to the stage performance. In particular, the quest for reconciliation between text and performance hints at the necessity of finding a more comprehensive theatrical theory, which should move beyond the distinction between the two elements, without, however, having to return to the situation of the *commedia dell'arte*.

As a matter of fact, the attempt at a reconciliation between text and performance which is found in *Teatro e letteratura* represents for Pirandello a development with respect to his attitude towards the theatre. Some of the issues treated in *Teatro e letteratura* had in fact already been treated by Pirandello in the essay *Illustratori, attori e traduttori* -published in 1908- where he deals with the problems faced by illustrators, actors and translators, who deal with 'un'opera d'arte già espressa, cioè già concepita ed eseguita da altri, che l'uno deve tradurre in un'altra arte ; il secondo in azione materiale ; il terzo in un'altra lingua.'<sup>22</sup> In this essay for the first time Pirandello deals with the problem of the distinction within the theatrical work between written text and stage performance and their irreconcilability in terms of aesthetic definition. The text can in fact be conceived as a work of art, since it is constructed according to specific theoretical criteria :

Il fenomeno più elementare che si trova in fondo all'esecuzione d'ogni opera d'arte è questo : un'immagine (cioè quella specie di essere immateriale e pur vivente, che l'artista ha concepito e sviluppato con l'attività creatrice dello spirito) un'immagine che tende a divenire [...] il movimento che la effettui, la renda reale, all'esterno, fuori dell'artista. L'esecuzione bisogna che balzi viva dalla concezione e soltanto per virtù di essa, per un movimento non provocato industriosamente, ma libero, cioè promosso dall'immagine stessa, che vuol liberarsi, tradursi in realtà e vivere. Si tratta di creare, abbiamo detto, una realtà che, come l'immagine, sia a un tempo materiale e spirituale, un'apparenza che sia l'immagine ma divenuta sensibile.<sup>23</sup>



Once again Pirandello claims that ‘nell’esecuzione si dovrebbero [...] trovare tutti i caratteri della concezione’ : the “image” created by art should be transferred to the real world without being altered and without losing its spiritual harmony. This concept of art cannot be fulfilled by theatre, as a third element is always inevitably interposed between the author and his work : this element is the actor, who, in order to render the character alive, should -exactly like the author- identify himself totally with it. However, no matter how good the actor is at this identification, at shedding his own individuality to enter that of the character, the mere act of interposition between text and performance on his part is bound to create some form of estrangement : the process of complete and perfect “incarnation” is often impeded by inevitable practical reasons, like, for instance, the actor’s very appearance, which can be changed through the use of make up, but which, although changed, will always be an adaptation, a mask rather than an incarnation. Besides, the actor perceives the author’s vision and his instructions on stage as a form of oppression, since, if he does not want to act as if ‘le parole scritte del dramma gli escano dalla bocca come da un portavoce o da un fonografo’<sup>24</sup>, he must reconceive and reconstruct the character : for the actor too ‘l’esecuzione bisogna che balzi viva dalla concezione’. However, Pirandello wonders if such an image, although provoked in the actor by the expression of the author, will be the same as the author’s, whether it will instead change, be altered and modified in the passage between author and actor. The conclusion drawn by Pirandello is that the image will never be the same. Indeed it will be just an approximation -however close- but not the same image, as ‘quel dato personaggio su la scena dirà le stesse parole del dramma scritto, ma non sarà mai quello del poeta, perché l’attore, perché l’attore l’ha ricreato in sé, e sua è

l'espressione quand'anche non siano sue le parole ; sua la voce, suo il corpo, suo il gesto.'<sup>25</sup>

Pirandello, therefore, finds himself in an *impasse* : if art is to be conceived of as a superior and orderly form of reality or life, and if such a reality, precisely because of its concentration and order, is truer than sensory reality, any attempt to mediate it through the senses is bound to result in a loss of truth. And this is precisely what the actor does : he inevitably deprives the character of ideal truth as he gives it more material reality.

Wladimir Krysinski points out how the Pirandellian notion of the 'impossibility' of theatre (and -Krysinski adds- literature) can be related to Roland Barthes's concept of modernity as beginning 'with the search for an impossible literature'. He argues that

the "impossibility" of literature and theatre in Pirandello is yet again the quest for meaning of the anti-mimesis that is a necessary consequence of the conflict of representations. The typical Pirandellian operations of destabilization and doubling of representations find their source in this impossibility that, according to Roland Barthes, defines modernity. But it is in no way an *impasse*. Rather, it is the horizon of a dialectic whose dynamic is posited as incomplete.<sup>26</sup>

In this sense, such an essay as *Illustratori, attori e traduttori* can be inscribed in the contemporary international debate on the theatre. Claudio Vicentini<sup>27</sup> has clearly demonstrated the extent to which Pirandello's theoretical speculation on theatre at the time in which *Illustratori, attori e traduttori* is written is in tune with contemporary theorization throughout Europe. In particular, he points out how, since symbolism, the theatre had been seen as an artistic form posing particular problems and how these problems had been partially -and polemically- solved by such theorists

as Mallarmé and Maeterlinck with the negation of the artistic possibilities of theatre. At the beginning of the Twentieth century then Stanislavski, Meyerhold and Craig tried to overcome the obstacles posed by the seemingly irreconcilable dichotomy between text and performance.<sup>28</sup> When he writes *Illustratori, attori e traduttori*, therefore, Pirandello, although not having first-hand knowledge of the debates conducted by his contemporaries throughout Europe, certainly makes an important contribution to a debate, which is central to the redefinition of aesthetic modernity, in particular on the issue of the necessity of superseding Naturalism.

Pirandello's conclusion in his essay is rather pessimistic, as there seems to be no possibility of reconciliation between the written play and its stage version :

Altro è il dramma, opera d'arte già espressa e vivente nella sua idealità essenziale e caratteristica ; altro è la rappresentazione scenica, traduzione e interpretazione di essa, copia più o meno somigliante che vive in una realtà materiale e più fittizia e illusoria. Se vogliamo trarre le ultime conseguenze da questa indagine estetica, se non vogliamo una traduzione più o meno fedele, ma l'*originale* veramente a teatro, ecco la commedia dell'arte : uno schema embrionale e la libera creazione dell'attore. Sarebbe sempre, come fu, triviale, perché opera d'improvvisazione, in cui non può aver luogo quello scarto dei particolari ovvii, comuni, quella semplificazione e concentrazione ideale, caratteristica d'ogni opera d'arte superiore.<sup>29</sup>

Reconciliation between written play and stage performance is impossible : the only form of theatre which manages to achieve some plausible authenticity or originality is the *commedia dell'arte*, with its emphasis on the actor's spontaneous creativity. But the potential for *originalità* contained in the *commedia dell'arte* can only exist precisely because of its lack of "poetic" text, that is precisely because of its "non-artistic", trivial character. The essay's pessimistic, almost suspended



conclusion, may convey Pirandello's unwillingness and inability to propose a solution to such irreconcilability.<sup>30</sup>

However, as has been seen, by 1918, although not having totally overcome the *impasse*, Pirandello has reached a more conciliatory position, as he seems to suggest the possibility of conceiving the theatrical play as something "other" than a text written exclusively in function of the stage performance (what he calls 'la traduzione'), and therefore claiming the right for theatre to have a literary status.

In a 1925 interview with the French *Le Temps* Pirandello explains that although as a result of the speculations expressed in *Illustratori, attori e traduttori* he had decided to write plays and never have them performed, his attitude changed as a result of the upheaval created by the war. He confesses:

It was precisely during the war that it was impossible to work calmly and serenely, not only on lengthy works but also on the creation of new short stories. I lost my inclination for narrative form. I was no longer content to tell stories, since around me everything was in movement. [...] I felt that it was simply a waste of time to tell stories. And moreover, I could no longer find material that seemed worthy of telling. Living in that state of tension and anxiety [...] I was bewildered, I had lost sight of those things, which, quite honestly, had always seemed to belong to me. Other things were in the air, were coming to the boil in my mind and they needed to be expressed in some kind of immediate way. [...] I saw them reaching out towards the action, towards the struggle. Words could no longer stay written on paper, they had to burst into the air, spoken or shouted aloud.<sup>31</sup>

Pirandello, like so many contemporary intellectuals, indicates the war as a moment of disturbance and change : during the war the disruption of personal life (in the interview he mentions his anxiety at the thought of his son in the trenches) is closely interrelated with shifts and changes in aesthetic paradigms. What was artistically valid before the war seems to no longer hold any expressive power, and he feels the need to find more powerful forms of artistic expression. Thus Pirandello

justifies the shift in his attitude towards the theatre. As far as this change of attitude is concerned, Vicentini notices how the transformed circumstances resulting from the outbreak of the war 'compelled [Pirandello] to give in to the temptation to render the word sonorous, physical. The theatre attracted him because there the written word became a material action and the characters' lines made a noise and projected themselves into the space.'<sup>32</sup> However, such a physical projection would necessarily result, according to Pirandello's view of theatre, in an artistic disaster, as the materiality acquired by the text once performed on stage does not allow the text to retain that character of superior reality that only the written work can have. The implications of Pirandello's choice to write for the theatre in spite of the consequences are seen by Vicentini as belonging to the movement towards art's self-destruction brought about by the war :

If the physical translation becomes the logical conclusion to literary creation, as Pirandello claimed it did when he said that he could no longer write in the usual form, then in the upheaval created, art could not help but move towards its own destruction and become a mockery and parody of itself. The decision to make theatre, to respond to an irresistible need takes on a meaning not very different from that of anti-artistic, anti-poetic and anti-literary gestures which were being made in 1916 at the Cabaret Voltaire in Zurich by the Dadaists.<sup>33</sup>

However Vicentini also points out how, in spite of sharing the motives that animate the contemporary European avant-garde and being therefore in tune with the international movement towards a radical renovation of art, Pirandello experiences a constant feeling of discomfort with regard to the problems posed by his activity as a playwright, to such an extent as to repeatedly declare that plays are for him only brief parentheses around his main role as a narrator and to announce, in 1919 and 1920, his intention of abandoning the theatre.<sup>34</sup> At the time of the interview with *Le Temps*.



though, Pirandello's position on the question of theatrical art has assumed a nationalistic tone, as he presents himself as part of a whole movement of renewal of theatre in contemporary Italy. He declares in fact that he believes his scruples about theatrical performance were the same as those experienced by all the writers who after the war were, like him, trying to create a new Italian theatre. In particular he stresses the importance among these playwrights of the common feeling that 'the stage is the natural domain of those who know how to control it, not only through personal merit, not only through ability recognized by their nation, but even more so because they have had the opportunity to take their first steps, sustained by the solid gifts of a very strong tradition.'<sup>35</sup> Italian theatrical tradition therefore plays a major role in the redefinition of a new "Italian" theatre, to be opposed to the other strong and therefore equally legitimate tradition which is the French one. French theatre, in fact, represents, in Pirandello's words, 'the theatre which has always existed'. The new Italian theatre, when compared to French theatre, acquires a character of novelty which on the one hand arouses interest and curiosity as a "new" creation, but on the other is strongly rooted in the nature of national life.

An analysis of the significance of the concept of "the new" in the theatre is undertaken by Pirandello in the essay *Teatro nuovo e teatro vecchio*. This essay, presented as a lecture in 1922 and published in 1923, deals with the problem of the definition of what is to be defined as "the new" in theatrical terms and to what extent an aesthetic evaluation of the theatre should be related to this aspect of theatrical work. In this essay Pirandello also takes strong issue with "pure" literary critics, since he considers them responsible for creating a concept of theatre which is misleading in aesthetic terms. These critics, in fact, evaluate theatre on the basis of the same criteria



as those applied to literature : a theatrical work is to be considered as a “work of art”, and only as such it is worth any critical attention. However, they tend to neglect the aspect of “craft” (‘il mestiere’) specific to theatre to such an extent as not to take into any consideration the so-called ‘commediografi del mestiere’, that is those playwrights who consider themselves more craftsmen than literary authors, but who nonetheless have acquired their craft through constant stage practice and for whom the stage is their exclusive domain and as such they protect it and defend it. Literary critics not only make no mention of the craft which is intrinsic to and an essential part of theatre, but through their exclusively literary evaluation of theatrical work too, they redefine aesthetic criteria in such terms as to, in effect, exclude theatre from the artistic categories.<sup>36</sup> Rather than promoting an aesthetic definition for theatre, therefore, literary criticism seems, instead, to have a damaging effect on it. Having criticized the abstractness with which certain issues are treated by critics when they deal with theatrical art, Pirandello then polemically poses the question of the element of “the new” in theatre in the following terms :

E' possibile o no riconoscere all'opera di teatro un valore d'arte, di espressione raggiunta, dal presupposto della sua “novità”, intendendo per novità una rispondenza del suo contenuto al particolare spirito di revisione e di ricostruzione dei valori intellettuali che anima i nostri tempi in ogni campo : politica, scienza, filosofia, arte stessa ? Le commedie o i drammi intonati a codesto spirito nuovo sono teatro nuovo, ossia, a questo vaglio, farina da cui si può estrarre il fiore dell'opera d'arte viva ; mentre quelle commedie e quei drammi che non accolgono in sé questo spirito nuovo restano crusca, senza alcuna speranza di salvezza ?<sup>37</sup>

According to him this formulation is incorrect, and the problem, if posed in such terms, insoluble. He maintains that it is necessary to consider such a concept not as an abstract one, defined through external problems existing independently from

the work of art, since art needs to be dealt with from within, taking into account mainly the problems related to form and what he calls ‘il fatto estetico’. In this respect “the new” in art is to be seen simply as ‘uno dei tanti necessarii valori di un’opera creata’. The elements that define “the new”, therefore, are not to be considered as existing *per se*: such elements and problems are identified and solved by the creative mind if not unconsciously, certainly without any need for theoretical investigation, as ‘non è vero che questi problemi siano del tempo o che dal tempo possano assumerli gli spiriti creatori.’<sup>38</sup> Pirandello claims that

se questi spiriti sono davvero creatori, i problemi sono d’essi spiriti, e non sono un indistinto e un indeterminato nel tempo ; ma punti indistinti e indeterminati dello stesso spirito attivo, il quale appunto perché li ha in sé, connaturali, e vivo travaglio, può trovare la forza di liberarsene, esprimendoli.<sup>39</sup>

The work of art acquires therefore the character of “the new” when it can give an accomplished form not to the writer’s problems or the problems of his time, but to the problems of what Pirandello calls the ‘spirito attivo’<sup>40</sup>, which to some extent can be said to “create” or to “be” time itself. The “new” work of art is that which is capable of expressing, through an immutable and eternally valid form, a particular problem which in turn acquires a universal character. The notion of “our time”, therefore, has no value outside the creation we make of it with our *spirito*, which in turn becomes the spirit of the time. ‘I problemi del tempo non esistono [...] per chi crea’, Pirandello claims: the problems expressed in the work of art reflect the problems and contradictions which are necessarily connected with every creation as a revelation of the *spirito*. He claims that ‘allo spirito è congenito il mistero, e guardare con occhi nuovi’<sup>41</sup> in the sense that the recreation and expression of life through “new eyes” effected by art is equivalent to giving it a perspective of mystery. The *spirito* is



not concerned, therefore, with the problems of history and time, but with establishing a relationship with mystery, that is to create a special new perspective on reality.

Donati points out how, according to such a view, the relationship between the artist and his work is closely comparable to that between the priest and the rite he performs, as he is 'investito dalla superiore volontà dello spirito, mediando la distanza tra la comunità di cui fa parte ed il mistero che la fonda. Come il sacerdote egli annulla se stesso nel rito e nella comunità, ma proprio in questo annullamento risalta il suo valore d'individuo segnato da un destino magico.'<sup>42</sup> According to Pirandello, in fact, the only individuals who can give universal sense and value to their time -that is a sense and a value with which everyone will always be able to identify- are those who can present this sense and value in the most disinterested fashion, so that everybody can appropriate them :

non dunque colui che praticamente costruirà per sé nella vita, ma quegli che afferma "il mio regno non è di questa terra" e tuttavia afferma di avere un regno ; chi, dunque crea la vita a sé e a tutti ; chi, dunque, riesce a far consistere una sua organica e totale visione della vita ; chi, dunque, è come lo spirito intero e puro che sa rivelarsi compiutamente : egli è il poeta, il fattore, il creatore : egli potrà dare al suo tempo un senso e un valore universali, perché col suo assoluto disinteresse, fa sì che tutti gli avvenimenti dei suoi sensi schietti e aperti alla vita [...] assumano in lui un organismo autonomo e compiuto, e quell'organismo egli voglia realizzare in sé quale la vita liberamente lo vuole per se stessa ; di modo che egli, in questo senso, è veramente uno spirito servo dello spirito, il creatore servo della creazione. In quell'organismo di vita egli ha un luogo come tutti gli altri ; egli ha creato non per dominare e reggere, ma per sistemare. E perciò Cristo, poeta, fattore, creatore di realtà, si disse figlio dell'uomo ; e dava senso e valore alla vita per tutti gli uomini.<sup>43</sup>

The idea of Christ as a "poet", a "creator" of reality is strictly connected with the concept of the artist as creator of life and of art as a form of action : the action



consists in the creation of life ‘a sé e a tutti’ and in the delivery of a total and organic vision of life, in the form of ‘un organismo autonomo e compiuto’.

Literary criticism<sup>44</sup> tends to blame obscurity and contradictions in art on expression, without realizing that the problems expressed in a work of art cannot be clarified : ‘restano e resteranno sempre così come sono stati fissati : problemi della vita. La loro irriducibilità consiste nella loro espressione, in quanto è rappresentazione.’<sup>45</sup> In order to exemplify this issue Pirandello uses the character of Hamlet : once Hamlet’s question is detached from the character it can be conceptualized as a philosophical problem. However, ‘lasciatelo lì, su le labbra d’Amleto, espressione, rappresentazione in atto del tormento di quella sua vita, e il problema dell’essere o non essere, non si risolverà mai, in eterno.’<sup>46</sup> And this applies not only to Hamlet, as a single individual in a specific moment of his life, but whoever contemplates -and lives- that form of life. Hamlet’s question, as expressed in its artistic form, is everyone’s problem, as it is a problem of life. Art gives it a finished form, thereby detaching it from space and time. Once such problems have been made eternal through the immutability of form, they can acquire an aesthetic dimension, that is they can be dispassionately contemplated as an expression of the mystery inherent in life, whose form no longer creates the astonishment initially caused by the new perspective on life that they represent, as ‘non già il senso del mistero sgomenta gli uomini, sapendosi da tutti che il mistero è nella vita : sgomenta il modo insolito nuovo di prospettarlo’<sup>47</sup>. However, a particular mode of expression which, through acquaintance and habit, has lost its character of novelty cannot be defined as “old” : in fact, Pirandello argues, ‘come può divenir vecchio, se è rappresentato in atto, in una forma perfetta, immarcescibile ? E’ soltanto venuto il tempo in cui lo si scopre “creato”...’<sup>48</sup>

The categories of “new” and “old” are therefore revised and redefined by Pirandello in terms of the attitude of the author during the creative process : he uses the example of Goldoni, who, although being in his time “new” and creating a complete and organic vision of life, did not represent the expression of ‘reali e liberi movimenti dello spirito’, but rather ‘un atteggiamento dello spirito’. Pirandello explains that, as far as Goldoni is concerned

è necessario riportarsi, in un certo senso, dai tempi a quei tempi determinati per gustare il valore dell’espressione d’un atteggiamento dello spirito, che non può essere gustata se non nel suo particolar sapore, e che non soffre riecheggiamenti : è necessario, insomma, riportarci al tempo del Goldoni.<sup>49</sup>

Goldoni’s theatre in his time represented “the new”, and, although the spiritual attitude from which it was born has changed and has been replaced by new values, this does not mean that such theatre has now become “old”. ‘In arte ciò che fu creato nuovo resta nuovo per sempre,’ Pirandello concludes, ‘Goldoni aveva occhi arguti, occhi vivaci, coi quali vide nuovo e creò nuovo. Chi oggi, novissimo, copia e non crea, cioè porta occhiali, e siano pure all’ultima moda, e pretende con essi guardare nel suo tempo i problemi più vivi e i valori più nuovi [...] farà teatro vecchio.’<sup>50</sup>

Such a reading of “the new” is not only meant to provide a polemical critical counterpart to the presumed captiousness of contemporary critical positions ; it is also designed to redefine the role of the author in the creative process. Donati perceptively points out<sup>51</sup> how Pirandello’s development of the notion of art as the expression of the *spirito* and the creation of an independent and orderly and therefore superior form of reality diminishes, to some extent, the role of the artist in the process of artistic creation, by reducing him to being almost an unaware, although

necessary, instrument of the *spirito*. However, the insistence on the freedom and spontaneity of art in the process of its making is counterbalanced by the active participation of the artist in the creation of a complete and accomplished work: it is this specificity which Pirandello defines as “the new” in his essay, thereby restoring the importance of the role of the author in the artistic process.

Having ascertained and accepted the artistic potential of theatrical activity and having established that the theatre is the place where the word acquires physicality and concreteness, Pirandello feels the need to defend its importance and its function against new forms of expression, cinema in particular. As far as this new artistic medium is concerned, Pirandello’s attitude differs from that of some of his contemporaries (the *solariani*, for instance<sup>52</sup>), as he does not approach cinema from the point of view of the *letterato*, using analytical tools which would normally be applied to literature. His interest in cinema focuses on its relationship with theatre and on its treatment of the spoken word.

In his essay *Se il film parlante abolirà il teatro* (1929), he claims: ‘che il teatro, prima d’essere una forma tradizionale della letteratura, sia un’espressione naturale della vita non è, in alcun modo da mettere in dubbio.’<sup>53</sup> Sound cinema is therefore dismissed since, by presenting itself as a ‘cattiva copia’ of theatre, it desacralizes it, not only -as Guido Fink argues- in terms of the excessive power acquired by the machine and the process of serialization undergone by new artistic forms<sup>54</sup>, but also in terms of the fundamental desacralization of the word effected by such forms. This is clear from Pirandello’s explanatory statement :



L'errore fondamentale della cinematografia è stato quello di mettersi, fin dal primo principio, su una falsa strada, su una strada a lei impropria, quella della letteratura (narrazione o dramma). Su questa strada si è trovata per forza in una doppia impossibilità, e cioè:

- 1) nell'impossibilità di sostituire la parola;
- 2) nell'impossibilità di farne a meno.

E con questo doppio danno:

- 1) un danno per sé, di non trovare una sua propria espressione libera dalla parola (espressa o sottintesa);
- 2) un danno per la letteratura, la quale, ridotta a sola visione, viene per forza ad avere diminuiti tutti i suoi valori spirituali, che, per essere espressi totalmente, hanno bisogno di quel più complesso mezzo espressivo che è loro proprio, cioè la parola.<sup>55</sup>

The "word" with its function and value is therefore, almost paradoxically, threatened by talking pictures, as they reduce the corporeality of the word, its materiality : a voice belongs to a live body which utters it and what a film presents is not bodies but photographed images, although in motion. Images do not speak, and when they do so the voice is in sharp contrast with the "shadows" that they are, thereby creating a sense of estrangement and unnaturalness. Besides, the effect created by the contrast between the images of an external world and the background sound of the voices inside the cinema is of complete unreality and even spoils the images themselves.

Together with 'l'orrore religioso nei confronti della benjaminiana riproducibilità tecnica' mentioned by Fink,<sup>56</sup> Pirandello's concern seems to be the lack of reality which characterizes cinema, a reality which is not to be confused with realism (Pirandello is not concerned with mimesis) and which represents the specificity of theatre as an "act of life" to be expressed through "the word". All this seems to be challenged by cinema and probably the technology of the new medium does play an important role in this evaluation. However, Pirandello is convinced that theatre cannot die or be replaced by cinema : he repeats and confirms his position in

the speech delivered at the international conference on theatre organized by the *Fondazione Alessandro Volta* in 1934. Although the number of international conferences on theatre might lead one to consider theatre as ‘un malato da assistere e sostenere con continui consulti’, Pirandello once again claims that theatre cannot and will not die, as it represents a form of life : ‘forma della vita stessa, tutti ne siamo autori ; e aboliti o abbandonati i teatri, il teatro seguirebbe nella vita, insopprimibile ; e sarebbe sempre spettacolo la natura stessa delle cose.’<sup>57</sup> Therefore, it is not possible to proclaim the death of the theatre, since the present time is so full of contrasts and therefore so rich in dramatic content. However, Pirandello is aware that his notion of theatre as life can dangerously affect the fundamental autonomy of art and he therefore makes a distinction between writing and living: ‘l’arte può sì anticipare la vita, predirla, ma invalorar quella d’oggi, prospettarla *sub specie aeternitatis*, è raro e assai difficile che possa farlo oggi stesso; le sarà più facile domani.’<sup>58</sup> Although the artist cannot but reflect his time -as he himself is a product of it- any conscious and intentional attempt on his part to transform art into action would mean turning art into politics, which, according to Pirandello, at times can be useful and even necessary but which deprives art of its nature. To use art for “practical” purposes would not only be against the nature of art, it would also be an improper instrument, much less effective than real and factual documents. If it is obvious that Pirandello is here trying to safeguard a certain autonomy for art with respect to political agendas, it is also true that he regards any attempt to deprive art of its autonomy as a threat to his specific concept of art:

si pensi che il mistero d’ogni nascita artistica è il mistero stesso d’ogni nascita naturale ; non cosa che si possa apposta fabbricare ma che deve naturalmente nascere, non a caso e tanto meno a capriccio degli scrittori,



con libertà senza leggi [...] ma anzi obbedientissima alle sue inderogabili leggi vitali...<sup>59</sup>

The concept of the autonomy of art does not therefore derive from a normative approach but rather from a notion of art as only obeying its internal laws, that is the laws of its life, which *is* life. Once again, the defence of its specificity represents the necessity of defending the value attributed to art (and to theatrical art in particular). In this speech Pirandello addresses the issue of the relationship between theatre and the public and of the nature of theatrical work, in particular once again the problem of the function of the written text in relation to its stage performance:

è sperabile che sia definita la questione che da tempo si dibatte se il teatro sia fatto per offrire uno spettacolo in cui l'opera d'arte, la creazione del poeta entri come uno dei tanti elementi in mano e al comando del regista, a pari dell'apparato scenico e del giuoco delle luci e di quello degli attori, o se invece tutti questi elementi e l'opera unificatrice dello stesso regista, creatore responsabile soltanto dello spettacolo, non debbano essere adoperati a dar vita all'opera d'arte che tutti li comprende e senza la quale ciascuno per se stesso [...] non avrebbe ragion d'essere: quella vita, intendo, inviolabile perché coerente in ogni punto a se stessa che l'opera d'arte vuole avere per sé e che perciò non dovrebbe essere ad arbitrio del regista alterare né tanto meno manomettere.<sup>60</sup>

Whatever the solution to such a question might be, Pirandello eventually seems to suggest that if 'l'opera d'arte è quella che resta'<sup>61</sup>, then the written text should be conceived as the work of art, beyond the occasions of its various stage performances, insofar as it comprises all the elements of a performable play. His position does not seem to have changed substantially since his early speculations on the nature of theatrical art: theatre once again is defended as the art which 'tra tutti gli spettacoli che possono per un momento entrare nella vita di un popolo, [...] è quello



che ne assomma e rispecchia più intimamente i valori morali: il teatro è quello che resta.’<sup>62</sup>

### Pirandello on Verga : redefining tradition(s)

Giovanni Verga è il più “antiletterario” degli scrittori.  
(*Discorso di Catania*, 1920)

In her deliberations on the relationship between Pirandello and Giovanni Verga Anna Laura Lepschy points out that an analysis of the specific treatment devoted by Pirandello to his great predecessor could quite appropriately be entitled *Verga pirandelliano*<sup>63</sup>. What emerges from Pirandello’s critical essays on Verga is in fact an idiosyncratic reading of the writer, which shows evidence of the complex relationship that links Pirandello with this author. The essays on Verga also strongly question any alleged influence of French Naturalism on the Sicilian writer and, more generally, any notion of literary tradition or abstract concept of literary genre, in favour of the uniqueness of single works of art.

Lepschy outlines how Pirandello’s reading of Verga, besides being influenced by Luigi Russo’s 1920’s study *Giovanni Verga*, is affected by his dislike of D’Annunzio -which automatically makes him “pro-Verga”, as the two authors represent two literary opposites- and marginally by his support of fascism, manifesting itself in the 1931 essay devoted to the writer, in which Pirandello relates Verga’s style to that of Mussolini.

Although Pirandello starts dealing with Verga as early as 1890 (with the articles *Prosa Moderna. Dopo la lettura del “Mastro don Gesualdo” del Verga* and *Per la solita quistione della lingua*<sup>64</sup>) it is only in the two essays written in 1920 and 1931 (respectively the *Discorso di Catania* and the *Discorso alla Reale Accademia d’Italia*) that he actually deals with Verga’s work, *Prosa moderna* being only a general reflection on the question of literary and spoken language in Italy, rather than

a critical piece on Verga's novel, and *Per la solita quistione della lingua* mentioning Verga's style only as an example of spoken Sicilian.

The *Discorso di Catania* opens with a polemical statement on the impossibility of critics assessing properly the literature of their time:

chi lavora con serietà, altezza e nobiltà d'intenti sa che conto si possa fare [...] della critica contemporanea, perché considera che non è possibile ai troppo vicini vedere dove e quanto uno scrittore nella sua opera sia riuscito a liberarsi della sua temporalità, vale a dire di tanti elementi spesso incoercibili, che sono del tempo e nel tempo, e che concorrono naturalmente a condizionare l'opera.<sup>65</sup>

Part of the reason of the faulty interpretation of Verga's work by his contemporaries is that they failed to understand that his *verismo* was not an artistic method artificially borrowed from a literary school -French naturalism- but 'sua intima tecnica, vale a dire libero e spontaneo movimento di un'immagine di vita ch'era dentro di lui e e che per quel movimento proprio e spontaneo [...] doveva venir fuori.'<sup>66</sup> Pirandello, therefore, applies to Verga his own peculiar conception of artistic creation, thereby distancing him from a naturalist concept of art and from the influence of French Naturalism. He argues that what appeared as an external, almost prescriptive influence in Verga's work, was in fact related to the 'estrinseche necessità naturali dell'opera stessa, leggi vitali, imprescindibili correlazioni organiche'<sup>67</sup>, which the critics could not identify and understand and attributed therefore to the influence of the French literary movement.

Pirandello's critique also focuses on Capuana's theorization, and in particular on the notion of *impersonalità* or objectivism, which, according to Pirandello, is not achievable, 'poiché l'arte' -he maintains- 'come coscienza del soggetto, non può mai



essere oggettiva se non a patto di porre ciò che è creazione nostra, fuori di noi, come se non fosse appunto nostra, ma una realtà per sé...'<sup>68</sup>

The notion of art as the creation of a reality to the shaping of which every element of the work of art contributes, including the language, leads Pirandello to reject both any notion of tradition as a legacy of forms handed down by preceding masters and the idea of genre as an abstract concept :

parlare come fa questi [Capuana] di tradizioni in arte, come di qualche cosa da cui l'opera d'arte dipenda e senza la quale sia, se non proprio impossibile, difficilissimo ch'essa nasca, è [...] porre male una questione [...] perché ogni vera opera d'arte è e dev'essere "unica" e dunque senza modelli. Non esiste per se stessa una forma "romanzo" o una forma "novella" [...] bensì *quei tali* romanzi, *quelle tali* novelle ciascuno e ciascuna con la sua forma propria, da non potersi confondere con le altre, se veramente son opere d'arte.<sup>69</sup>

The only character of continuity in the Italian literary history is identified by Pirandello in the presence two main styles whose coexistence has characterized Italian literature throughout the centuries, namely what he calls *stile di cose* and *stile di parole*. In the former words have the function of expressing 'la cosa' -that is reality- and they have no mediatory role between reality and the reader, so that the words disappear and the reader can see the naked reality, as it is represented. In the latter the reality represented by words is not as important as the words that express it ; the reader is constantly invited to appreciate and admire the mastery and the skill deployed by the writer. According to Pirandello the identification of these two styles makes it possible to distinguish two main strands in the Italian tradition, the *scrittori di cose* and the *scrittori di parole*. The first which is read therefore in terms of the opposition between Dante and Petrarch, Machiavelli and Guicciardini, Ariosto and Tasso, Manzoni and Monti, and finally Verga and D'Annunzio. Italian literary

history shows that preference has always been given to the *stile di parole*<sup>70</sup>, however, Pirandello expresses his particular appreciation for the *stile di cose*, as the writers using this style conceive language not simply as a stylistic device, as an element which is external to the artistic creation, but as a means to create form, an intrinsic element of the reality created.

In this context, even Verga's use of a dialectal language is to be read as 'una vera creazione di forma', which should be analysed neither in terms of mimetic reproduction nor of *questione della lingua*. The use of such language belongs to the life of Sicily as it imposed itself on Verga, and to the process of linguistic "creation" of a region, which characterizes many Italian writers and enriches their literature. In particular, Pirandello stresses that the distinction between *dialettalità* and *letterarietà* can be applied to the two categories of *scrittori di cose* and *scrittori di parole*: the use of dialectal language has always been a characteristic of the former category, 'a cominciare da Dante, che nei dialetti appunto [...] vedeva risiedere il volgare'<sup>71</sup>, whereas the epitome of *letterarietà* is represented by D'Annunzio, 'scrittore di parole' *par excellence*. In defence of *dialettalità* he argues that in Italy the real life of the nation is only properly expressed by the various regional languages. Nation, he maintains, 'da noi vuol dire o volgarità meccanica e stereotipata di stile burocratico o scolastico, o astratta verbosità di lingua letteraria e retorica...'<sup>72</sup>

In the *Discorso alla Reale Accademia d'Italia* Pirandello equates the *stile di cose* with Mussolini's style, thereby attributing both this style and the literary tradition associated with it the character of a "healthy" national literary strand that has constantly opposed the vacuity of pure rhetoric. The *stile di cose* is therefore associated by Pirandello with the myth of action which characterizes fascism even in its cultural manifestations:



Il nuovo Governo d'Italia, costruttore, nello stile del suo Duce fatto di cose e non di parole, perciò fa bene ad onorare oggi con questa celebrazione l'arte di Giovanni Verga, a cui i giovani (ed era inevitabile) ritornano, sazi e stanchi di quella troppa letteratura che era tornata a dilagare in Italia per colpa di chi non aveva saputo vedere nel Leopardi e nel Manzoni i due filtri che avevano purgato la poesia e la prosa italiane dalla secolare retorica.<sup>73</sup>

In his essays on Verga Pirandello restates his conception of art, as it was expressed in his preceding essays, and applies it to his predecessor, thereby redeeming his work from a concept of art as mere mimetic reproduction : it is impossible to say that Verga 'nella realtà [...] vede il mondo quale esso è, e si spiega che non può essere diverso da quello che è', as the world 'non è per se stesso in nessuna realtà, se non gliela diamo noi'<sup>74</sup> :

Non solo per l'artista, ma non esiste per nessuno una rappresentazione, sia creata dall'arte o sia comunque quella che tutti ci facciamo di noi stessi e degli altri e della vita, che si possa credere "una realtà". Sono in fondo una medesima illusione quella dell'arte e quella che comunemente a noi tutti viene dai nostri sensi.<sup>75</sup>

The artistic representation, therefore, as well as the reality presented to our senses, is an illusion, and in this sense both representations are "creations". The difference between the two is that art is "disinterested", whereas the creation that is life is guided by practical interests.

In conclusion, for his evaluation of Verga's work Pirandello draws on his specific concept of the artistic creation as an "act of life", which distances Verga from any affiliation to French Naturalism or even from Capuana's *verista* theorization. Such a redemption, which denies the Sicilian writer's belonging to any literary category, questions the notion of literary tradition and of that of genre, and



focuses on the writer's individual works and their artistic achievements. The only categories which Pirandello seems to accept within the Italian literary history are those of *scrittura di cose* and *scrittura di parole*. Verga is ultimately placed in the former category, which shifts the emphasis of his work on the reality created rather than on the language used. Pirandello's complex rereading and, to a certain extent reappropriation of Verga is in function of his polemical attitude towards mimetic literature, but at the same time shows a reverence for the predecessor's work, which, setting aside the theoretical contentions, is able to show an affectionate image of Verga -as Lepschy points out- as a writer 'whose strength lay in substance and not in form and in his depiction of a local reality presented with unobtrusive involvement and sympathy.'<sup>76</sup>

<sup>1</sup> See the Introduction to this thesis.

<sup>2</sup> Robert Dombroski, 'Pirandello e la poetica della crisi', in *Luigi Pirandello : poetica e presenza*, ed. by W. Geerts, F. Musarra, S. Vanvolsem (Leuven : Leuven University Press and Roma : Bulzoni, 1987), p. 69.

<sup>3</sup> In his article Dombroski follows the typology presented by Michela Nacci in her study, 'La crisi della civiltà : fascismo e cultura europea', in *Tendenze della filosofia italiana nell'età del fascismo*, ed. by Ornella Pompeo Faracovi (Livorno : Belforte, 1985), pp. 41-71.

<sup>4</sup> Cfr. R. Dombroski, 'Pirandello...', p. 78.

<sup>5</sup> Cfr. Peter Bürger, *Theory of the Avant-Garde*, trans. by Michael Shaw (Minneapolis : University of Minnesota Press, 1984), pp. 54-55.

<sup>6</sup> 'This change in understanding makes room for a reading strategy that responds to the textual practice of the avant-garde itself. It involves a move beyond the traditional mimetic paradigm. More concisely, the question would no longer be : How does the micro-time of aesthetics *represent* the macro-time of history ? Instead, one would ask : What *happens* to time in the high modernist text, to that time which cannot be divided into the micro- and macro-, to the only time there is, to the time which is the time both of production and of consumption - in other words to history ? The type of reading that such a position encourages would be a "productive" reading - or alternatively, a reading *of* production. It would read the text as a process of production existing within reality, rather than a signifying system situated outside reality by virtue of the very distanciation inherent in representation.' Andrew Hewitt, *Fascist Modernism. Aesthetics, Politics, and the Avant-Garde* (Stanford : Stanford University Press, 1993), p. 33.

<sup>7</sup> Arcangelo Leone De Castris, 'L'intellettuale e il potere', in *Pirandello e D'Annunzio*, ed. by Giuseppe Petronio (Palermo: Palumbo, 1989), p. 155.

<sup>8</sup> Corrado Donati, 'Il teatro, la parola, la verità', in *Saggi pirandelliani* (Urbino: Università degli Studi di Urbino, 1984), pp. 43-44. On the importance of "the word" as a cognitive instrument see also the reflections on the notion of allegory in Pirandello in Romano Luperini's 'Allegorismo "versus" simbolismo. Pirandello e D'Annunzio novellieri', in *Pirandello e D'Annunzio*, p. 128: 'Proprio perché totalmente mondana e temporale, l'allegoria moderna accetta pienamente la dimensione pragmatica del linguaggio. L'allegorista conosce il valore puramente convenzionale del significato, ma sa anche che è impossibile prescindere. D'altronde non gli sfugge che la scrittura stessa è di per sé mera allegoria, condannata com'è alla mera divaricazione fra significanti e significato e al carattere inevitabilmente aleatorio della stipulazione intersoggettiva dei valori. La comunicazione si presenta, quindi, per un verso, destinata non solo alla precarietà ma anche a un compromesso con la finzione, essendo tutta interna a un meccanismo sociale alienato, e, per un altro, come unico strumento che possa permettere ancora un'intesa fra esseri umani. L'allegorista è consapevole dell'uno e dell'altro aspetto : non mitizza il linguaggio, non lo volge al sublime, lo riconosce nella sua caducità e parzialità ; ma, nello stesso tempo, non rinuncia a utilizzarlo in chiave ermeneutica e pragmatica. Non ha dimenticato l'antica istanza concettuale e razionale, etica e suasoria, del discorso allegorico. La parola quotidiana, il "parlar comune", "l'agire comunicativo" presuppongono una base minima di razionalità su cui è possibile elaborare un' "etica del discorso", [...] ricostruire lo spazio di una verità, al di là del fallimento delle ideologie e dei fondamenti metafisici'.

<sup>9</sup> 'L'Azione parlata', in *Saggi, poesie, scritti vari*, ed. by Manlio Lo Vecchio Musti (Milano : Mondadori, 1993<sup>5</sup> - 1<sup>st</sup> ed. 1960), p. 1016.

<sup>10</sup> *Arte e Teoria. Studi sulla poetica del giovane Pirandello* (Stockholm : Almqvist & Wiskell, 1966).

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 144.

<sup>12</sup> Cfr. 'Illustratori attori e traduttori', in *Saggi, poesie...*, pp. 217-218.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>14</sup> 'Teatro e letteratura', in *Saggi, poesie...*, p. 1020.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 1020-1021.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 1021.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 1022.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 1023.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 1024.

<sup>22</sup> 'Illustratori, attori e traduttori', in *Saggi, poesie...*, cit., p. 217.

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 214-215.

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 216.



<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>26</sup> Wladimir Kryszinski, 'Pirandello in the Discursive Economies of Modernity and Postmodernism', in Gian Paolo Biasin and Manuela Gieri *Luigi Pirandello. Contemporary Perspectives*, ed. by Gian Paolo Biasin and Manuela Gieri (Toronto-Buffalo-London : University of Toronto Press, 1999), p. 221.

<sup>27</sup> Cfr. 'Pirandello and the problem of theatre as an impossible art', *The Yearbook of the British Pirandello Society*, 4 (1984), 1-20.

<sup>28</sup> Cfr. *Ibid.*, p. 6.

<sup>29</sup> 'Illustratori...', p. 224.

<sup>30</sup> Corrado Donati notices how this *impasse* can be related to the notion of the word (and the written word in particular) as carrier of truth: 'L'importanza della parola è tale, per l'autore, da indurlo in un primo tempo a considerare la sua forma scritta quasi come una garanzia della inalterabilità del contenuto di verità che essa reca. Tant'è vero che già in *Illustratori, Attori e traduttori* egli prende posizione contro la messa in scena di un'opera, rivendicando su essa il primato del testo scritto e finendo così per negare, paradossalmente, il carattere specifico della rappresentazione teatrale'. ('Il teatro...', p. 45).

<sup>31</sup> 'Interview with Luigi Pirandello' (trans. Susan Bassnett), *The Yearbook of the British Pirandello Society*, 4 (1984), pp. 51-52.

<sup>32</sup> 'Pirandello...', p. 10.

<sup>33</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 11.

<sup>34</sup> *Ibid.* Vicentini notices how, in this respect, *Sei personaggi in cerca d'autore* has the quality of Pirandello's -as playwright- last will and testament, as it reaffirms the condemnation of theatre first expressed in *Illustratori, attori e traduttori*.

<sup>35</sup> 'Interview...', p. 52.

<sup>36</sup> An interesting example of such an attitude identified by Pirandello in the "pure" literary critics is offered by the following passage by Giuseppe Prezzolini: 'secondo me il teatro è un inganno e la critica teatrale che si esercita dopo aver ascoltato una recita è un secondo inganno non minore del primo. Ciò che è scritto viene trasformato in mille modi dall'attore, dalla scena e dal pubblico, nè il dialogo permette mai che ci si possa fermare sopra un punto che interessa, una frase o una parola che si vorrebbe esaminare. Soltanto la lettura permette veramente di vedere che cosa è un'opera, se cioè essa ha o non ha stile. Ciò spiega i grandi successi teatrali di lavori che non hanno nessun significato, e ravvicina il teatro all'oratoria, poiché anche questa si vale di mezzi esterni che servono a ingannare l'ascoltatore. Il teatro e il discorso possono imporsi alle moltitudini grossolane, proprio in grazia della truccatura che subiscono, a traverso l'autore o a traverso l'oratore [...] i concetti e le immagini.' *La cultura italiana* (Firenze : La Voce, 1923), p. 318.

<sup>37</sup> 'Teatro nuovo e teatro vecchio', in *Saggi, poesie...*, p. 232.

<sup>38</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>39</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>40</sup> Cfr. 'Teatro nuovo...', p. 233 : 'Se questi spiriti sono davvero creatori, i problemi sono d'essi spiriti, e non sono un indistinto e un indeterminato nel tempo ; ma punti indistinti e indeterminati dello stesso spirito attivo, il quale appunto perché li ha in sé, connaturali, e vivo travaglio, può trovare la forza di liberarsene, esprimendoli.'

<sup>41</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 234.

<sup>42</sup> Corrado Donati, 'Il teatro...', p. 42.

<sup>43</sup> 'Teatro nuovo...', pp. 233-234.

<sup>44</sup> The whole essay is conceived as a polemical attack against "pure" literary critics who consider theatre an undignified form of art : 'Ma io debbo parlarvi del teatro nuovo e del teatro vecchio e vi ho parlato finora d'occhi e d'occhiali : cioè, di creazione originale e d'esercizio di copia che fu proprio, ed è tuttora, di tutto il teatro vecchio. Non voglio dirne male, sapete perché ? anche per far dispetto ai professionisti di quell'altra piaga della società civile che è la "pura" critica letteraria. A costoro, ogni dibattito sul teatro par quasi indegno della loro attenzione e considerazione, ove non sia, per una scusabile eccezione, assunto a forma espressiva da qualche poeta altrimenti considerevole e rispettato.' ('Teatro nuovo e teatro vecchio', pp. 230-231).

<sup>45</sup> 'Teatro nuovo...', p. 235.

<sup>46</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>47</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 236.

<sup>48</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>49</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 241.



<sup>50</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 242.

<sup>51</sup> Cfr. 'Il teatro...', p. 41.

<sup>52</sup> See Chapter Four of this thesis.

<sup>53</sup> 'Se il film parlante abolirà il teatro', in *Saggi, poesie...*, p. 1031.

<sup>54</sup> Cfr. Guido Fink, 'Voce di macchina e voce di padre ("Se il film parlante abolirà il teatro")', in *Pirandello saggista*, ed. by Paola Daniela Giovanelli (Palermo : Palumbo, 1982), p. 277.

<sup>55</sup> 'Se il film...', p. 1032.

<sup>56</sup> 'Voce...', p. 275.

<sup>57</sup> 'Discorso al Convegno "Volta" sul teatro drammatico', in *Saggi, poesie...*, p. 1037.

<sup>58</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 1038.

<sup>59</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>60</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 1041.

<sup>61</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>62</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>63</sup> Cfr. Anna Laura Lepschy, 'Pirandello's Verga', in *Reflexivity. Critical themes in the Italian Cultural Tradition*, ed. by Prue Shaw and John Took (Ravenna : Longo, 2000), p. 83.

<sup>64</sup> These essays focus on the *questione della lingua* and its impact on literary production in Italy rather than on Verga as such (for an analysis of the issues discussed in these two essays cfr. Anna Laura Lepschy, 'Pirandello's Verga', pp. 85-87).

<sup>65</sup> 'Discorso di Catania', in *Saggi*, ed. by Manlio Lo Vecchio Musti (Milano : Mondadori, 1939), p. 447. For the essays on Verga the 1939 edition of the *Saggi* has been used, as some references to Mussolini contained in the 'Discorso alla Reale Accademia d'Italia' were removed by the editor in the 1960 edition.

<sup>66</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 448.

<sup>67</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 448-449.

<sup>68</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 451.

<sup>69</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 450.

<sup>70</sup> 'Se pensiamo che Dante muore in esilio e il Petrarca è incoronato in Campidoglio, che Machiavelli finisce come egli stesso si descrive in una lettera famosa; che l'Ariosto è fatto di poeta "cavallaro", mentre solo la follia toglie i benefici della fortuna al Tasso, che tuttavia alla fine è proposto anche lui al sommo onore dell'incoronazione in Campidoglio; se pensiamo che da una delusione è accolto il primo apparire dei *Promessi Sposi* e che il Leopardi passa di vita quasi ignorato, quando si sa a quali venturosi onori pervenne il Monti, dobbiamo convenire che in questa nostra Italia [...] ha più diritto di cittadinanza chi sa dire più parole che cose.' ('Discorso alla Reale Accademia...', p. 429).

<sup>71</sup> 'Discorso di Catania', p. 456.

<sup>72</sup> *Ibid.* Although the contents of the 'Discorso di Catania' and the 'Discorso alla Reale Accademia D'Italia' are virtually identical, for obvious political reasons the comment on the abstractness of the idea of nation in Italy does not appear in the 1931 'Discorso alla Reale Accademia D'Italia'.

<sup>73</sup> 'Discorso alla Reale Accademia d'Italia', in *Saggi*, p. 429.

<sup>74</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 458.

<sup>75</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 459.

<sup>76</sup> 'Pirandello's Verga', p. 94.

## Conclusion

The debates selected for discussion in this thesis can be considered as significant examples of various cultural and political tendencies in the critical perspectives of the *cultura militante* of the 1920s. The issues of tradition and modernity were treated in the years leading to the war by groups of intellectuals like those of *Il Leonardo* and *La Voce*<sup>1</sup>, however in the post-war period these concepts acquire new meanings, with implications both in the field of aesthetics and of politics.

Scholarly debates about the significance of such redefinitions have, as has been indicated throughout this work, been renewed in recent years, especially in the field of cultural history and visual art, and it is hoped that this thesis's particular emphasis on the use of the concepts of "tradition" and "modernity" in 1920s literary and artistic criticism has made a pertinent contribution to such debates. These will, however, continue and among the issues brought to the surface by the foregoing analysis, the following seem particularly worth developing :

a concept of modernity based on progress, or, from the purely artistic point of view, on the notion of the "most advanced material"<sup>2</sup> is, in many of the texts considered, subverted. The notion of "the new" is dismissed as a parameter of modernity, or, to be more precise, it is redefined according to other criteria of modernity connected with the notion of "return", hence, for instance *La Ronda*'s self-conscious "neo"-classicism or De Chirico's "new" classicism.

However, the definition of modern as "of the present time" is fundamentally retained, thereby inviting artists and intellectuals to redefine their time and the

conditions that determine their own version of the new modernity. One of the key factors in this redefinition is the widespread feeling that the end of the war coincided with the beginning of a new epoch. In the post-war period, therefore, many intellectuals seem to define the modernity of their cultural project according to this notion of palingenesis.

As the idea of palingenesis is generally associated not only with a spiritual and cultural regeneration, but also with a period of national rebirth, the notions of “modern” and “new” are often closely intertwined with issues of national cultural identity: the quest for modernity is therefore equated with the recovery and perpetuation of the artistic national character, in the attempt to create a new, specifically “national” modernity. In these cases, the conquest of modernity is conceived of as emancipation from the intrusion into Italian culture of elements from foreign cultural traditions.

It is also noticeable that increasingly, during the 1920s, redefinitions of artistic modernity pay special attention to the relationship with the public, as it begins to emerge as an expanding powerful force.

The perception and definition of artistic modernity is not uniform throughout the Twenties. In fact, it often changes according to specific political circumstances. In particular, it is noteworthy that the notion of a European modernity is constantly opposed to nationalist redefinitions of the concept, and that the point of reference for this alternative modernity is the literary and artistic production of contemporary Europe. The reference to Europe, however, has not only an emancipatory function. It also provides an alternative perspective on an otherwise optimistic idea -however haunted by the spectres of technology and urban modernization- of palingenetic modernity.



Being strictly interrelated to the process of rethinking modernity, the “return to tradition” following the post-war general “call for order” is no longer conceived of as an act of regression, but as the quest for continuity within national cultural history. Because of its association with the quest for a national modernity, the notion of tradition undergoes, during the 1920s, a series of disparate appropriations : tradition is in turn interpreted as a tradition of style whose points of reference are Leopardi or the *Cinquecento*, the *stile di cose* and the *stile di parole* ; as a tradition of order and *classicità* epitomized by Canova’s neo-classicism ; as a rural tradition ; as a continuity of acts of rupture ; as the internationalism of the tradition of Enlightenment ; or even, as in the case of *Solaria*, the recent tradition represented by *Lacerba* or *La Ronda*. In addition, the constant confrontation with Futurism that characterizes the debates in the 1920s demonstrates that, beside thinking that Futurism cannot represent the artistic expression of post-war Italy, artists consider Futurism as part of the tradition to be confronted in the redefinition of post-war artistic discourses.

Among the concepts which are used to reconcile the return to tradition and the quest for modernity, the idea of *classicità* has a prominent position. However, the various appropriations of this concept seem to challenge its specific essence. In the post-war period, in fact, the notion of the classical is detached from its associations with classical antiquity and, although used as an aesthetic category, is deprived of any normative character and is turned into a more general category, often acquiring a moral connotation.

The implied reference to the nineteenth-century dispute between *classicisti* and *romantici* is often used to establish an opposition which is at the core of the theorization of the idea of the classical in the 1920s, that is the notion of *classicità* as

opposed to Romanticism.

The idea of the classical, with its morally positive connotation, is often read as the core of the Italian cultural identity throughout the centuries. Any diversion from the classical in the history of Italian art and literature is therefore often read as the intrusion of the North-European, romantic spirit into the Italian spirit. As a consequence, the quest for *classicità* is associated with the recovery of a lost *italianità*, after the period of the invasion and corruption of Italian culture represented by *fin de siècle decadentismo* and pre-war avant-garde.

The result of this process of redefinition of the classical is that the rediscovery of *classicità* can be seen as the key to a new, Italian modernity, to be opposed to an imported version of modernity of North-European, romantic origin. Such a highly nationalized definition implies that the terms of reference for the description of the classical shift constantly : *Valori Plastici*, for instance, uses both the fourteenth and the fifteenth century. The *Quattrocento* is also a reference for Bontempelli's theorization. However, *La Ronda* uses the prose of the sixteenth century and Leopardi as a model for its version of the classical, and many fascist intellectuals see the classical rather as a spiritual category, with political as well as moral and artistic implications.

With the rise of fascism these issues are taken further and politicized, so that on the one hand the rise of fascism is seen as the beginning of a new epoch, of which the new art should be the expression, hence its inevitable character of modernity ; on the other hand the notion of Italian *classicità* is interpreted not only as an aesthetic category, but also, more generally, as a spiritual and political category, manifesting itself as a form of order throughout the centuries.

However, the semantic expansion and variety of interpretations undergone by

the term “classical” in the post-war period disrupts the fundamental essence of the notion of *classicità*. In fact, its traditional definition as harmony, simplicity and grandeur is subverted, as the concept assumes a highly politicized connotation and as it is used as a key notion in the redefinition of a “new” modernity.

Finally, the discussion of such issues as tradition and modernity in the debates on fascist art, literature and culture reveals a gradual inextricability of aesthetic and political discourses, as artists and intellectuals involved in the construction of a cultural identity for the new regime not only theorize art according to ideology but also present idiosyncratic versions of fascism based on the discourse of aesthetics. In this context, such categorizations as “aestheticization of politics” or “politicization of aesthetics”, which have been part of the debates on fascist art since Walter Benjamin’s seminal essay *The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction* (1936)<sup>3</sup>, seem to be so intertwined as to appear almost indistinguishable, thereby calling for new approaches and redefinitions.



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<sup>1</sup> Cfr. Gianni Grana's observation, with particular reference to Giovanni Papini, that 'modernità e tradizione, spirito europeo e spirito italiano, provincialismo e cosmopolitanismo, erano già stati termini quasi obbligati di accese controversie. In tutte le battaglie culturali, da *Leonardo* a *La Voce*, a *Lacerba*, tra mutevoli vicende intellettuali e torsioni dialettiche e oratorie, Papini agitava sostanzialmente questi temi, anche con esplicito accento politico.' Mentioning the case of Papini as exemplary of that of many avant-garde intellectuals of his time, such as Prezzolini and Soffici, Grana also notices that 'alla polemica antitradizionalista e anticlassicista dei primi anni, alle crociate per una cultura nuova rinsanguata di linfe "europee", per una cultura d'idee, susseguiva via via una flessione su posizioni "italiane", tradizionali e provinciali (e nazionaliste e conservatrici in politica).' (Gianni Grana, 'Curzio Malaparte. Ambiguità germano toscana, fra 900 e *Strapaese*, fascismo e fronda, tradizione "italiana" e "modernità" europea, prosa neoclassica e fantasie surreal-magiche' in *Novecento. I contemporanei*, ed. by Gianni Grana 10 vols., Milano : Marzorati, 1979, pp. 4552-4553).

<sup>2</sup> See Chapter 1 of this thesis.

<sup>3</sup> On this issue cfr. Emilio Gentile, *Le origini dell'ideologia fascista* (Bologna : Il Mulino, 1996), pp. 26-45, and Russell Berman, 'The Aestheticization of Politics : Walter Benjamin on Fascism and the Avant-Garde', *Stanford Italian Review. Special Issue on Fascism and Culture*, ed. by Jeffrey Schnapp and Barbara Spackman, VIII (1990), pp. 35-52.

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